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SORCEROUS STABBER

ORPHEN

THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

4. GATHER IN MY FOREST, WOLVES!

VISIT...

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SORCEROUS STABBER
ORPHEN
THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

"A Sorcerer..."

"Huh?"

The boy turned to search for the owner of the voice.
When he found the person, his jaw dropped.



It was a near-perfect pillar of white flames, something like that
couldn't be naturally caused by human hands...
There was no other explanation...

"... It's sorcery!"





The little pup seemed more than happy in her arms,
but Claiomh suddenly felt an ominous presence.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter I: Forest Maiden](#)

[Chapter II: Deep Dragon](#)

[Chapter III: Orphen, Captured!](#)

[Chapter IV: Fiena's Request](#)

[Chapter V: MacDougal's Secret](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue

‘Grow up to be a strong girl.’

These were her mother’s dying words.

The last words she heard before she became truly alone in the world.

She wasn’t happy to have these words to live by. She didn’t know how to become strong. She had never had anyone to teach her how.

Three years passed, and she still had no idea. And now, running through the forest, she needed that knowledge more than ever.

It takes tenacity to run through the forest at the best of times. It also requires a good sense of footing as well as practice.

The girl had none of these things. She could only run as fast as she was able, getting covered in scratches and scrapes every step of the way. She was short of breath already, but she had to keep running.

She had only gone into the forest to pick some mushrooms, wearing little more than a green open-necked shirt and a pair of shorts. She only now realized what a mistake this had been. Her legs were bleeding from all the cuts and scrapes from the undergrowth, and several sharp twigs and sticks had pierced her shoes and stabbed her in the feet over and over.

The forest in midsummer was thick with the scent of greenery, and the air was so thick it felt like it was suffocating her. The moisture kicked up from the grass clung to her and mingled with her sweat, glimmering in the light shining in through the treetops.

The girl wasn’t even old enough to be in high school yet. While she was clearly not used to the forest itself, it wasn’t hard to tell that she had been raised in a rural farming village. Her arms and legs weren’t particularly dainty, but she was by no means unattractive — though the figure of her running through the forest was less like that of an elegant racehorse and more like that of a farm pony, with her black hair tied back in a ponytail to match. She kept her brown eyes fixed on the road straight ahead of her, but it was no use. One of her legs got

caught tangled up in the undergrowth.

I can't stop here...!

She wanted very much to stop and rest, but she couldn't afford herself that leisure. Her heart throbbing in her chest told her that she had long since passed her limits. Her eyes were swollen, and she felt extremely tired. If possible, she would have preferred to lay down where she was and just fall into a deep sleep, but...

I can't stop here! she repeated to herself.

She didn't even turn around to get a look at her pursuers. She could tell from the sound of their footsteps that they were close by. It was the same three boys she had always seen huddled up in a corner of the village. Those same three tall boys were chasing her through the forest. She had noticed them following close behind her just shortly after she had taken a walk outside of the village. As soon as she had started running to put some distance between them, the boys had done the same. They were chasing her.

She wasn't yet old enough to understand what would happen to her if she got caught by them, but some primal instinct told her that three boys chasing after a girl through the forest where nobody could hear her scream was the worst possible situation she could have found herself in. Not a single one of the boys was foolish enough to raise their own voice or shout things like "Stop!" or "Wait!" either. They simply, silently, chased after her like hunters stalking their prey.

The girl understood in some corner of her mind that she would eventually run out of strength and collapse. She also knew that when that happened, the boys would find her and she would have no strength left to resist whatever they might do to her.

Still, she had to keep running. She knew that she couldn't afford to stop here, but...

It's no good! she screamed internally.

One moment she had been running, and the next she was on the ground. She must have tripped over something. She only noticed that her body wasn't

moving when she crashed face-first into the root of a tree. Momentum carried her and she tumbled through the woods on her back.

Before she could get back to her feet, she thought she caught sight of one of the boys. Rage and disgust welled up from deep within her, but it was too late. Now that her body had come to a halt, she found that she couldn't pull herself back to her feet. She tried desperately to catch her breath. It felt like her lungs were on fire.

I have to keep running! she tried to scream in fear, but the words didn't come to her. She tried to at least bring herself up to her knees, but even that proved a challenge.

I need to run away! she screamed to herself, but her body refused to obey. She couldn't take another step.

Her struggles in vain, she could only lay there helplessly as someone grabbed her by the ankle.

"...!" she gasped. When she turned to see who had grabbed her, she saw the face of one of the boys. She reflexively scratched his face with her right hand, putting a surprising amount of strength behind it. Her nails dug into the boy's skin and tore into his face, but he seemed completely unfazed. In fact, she had hurt herself more than her assailant. The strength of her swipe had broken her nails.

The boy sat on top of her like a man mounting a horse and reached one hand towards her chest. She heard the sound of several buttons being torn from her clothes as he ripped her shirt open.

"Mommy...!"

The girl would only realize how foolish her cries had sounded long after the fact. With the last of her strength, she turned her head and bit into the boy's arm as hard as she could. The boy yelped and withdrew his arm in pain. The girl tried to use this as a chance to escape, but she wasn't strong enough to force his body weight off of her, and so her final struggle turned out to be completely futile.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she noticed the other two boys closing in on

her now. They were panting heavily as they stared down at her with lust-filled eyes. The boy on top of her lost his temper and raised one hand high into the air, balled up into a fist.

‘Grow up to be a strong girl,’ she could hear a voice telling her. It was her mother’s voice.

‘You need to become strong enough to live on your own from now on...’

I don’t know how to be strong! the girl lashed out in terror. The last thing she saw was the boy’s fist filling her vision. There wasn’t any escape for her now.

Even so, she raised her head as much as she could in a feeble attempt to dodge the fist. The next instant, her vision went black.

The girl felt no pain. The last thing she remembered was the sensation of the fist hitting her face, and the back of her head crashing into the ground with tremendous force. She lost consciousness immediately after that.

Her mind felt fuzzy and she felt an unnatural throbbing from the back of her head. She didn’t hear the boys screaming in fright. She was unaware of the fact that torrents of blood were pouring out from the back of her head. She never felt her body convulse one last time as she drew her final breath.

It didn’t feel like much time had passed for the girl. She opened her eyes to find herself alone in the woods.

“...?”

She could feel a dull pain in the back of her head. She sat up and ran her fingers through her hair. Her head, her face, and her clothes were all soaked in blood. The boys were nowhere to be seen.

—*Rustle...*—

She could hear footsteps in the grass behind her. Frightened, she turned to see who — or what — it was. What she found was a giant shadow, towering above her as though splitting the forest into two halves.

She thought that it must be a God.

The thing stood there with bewitchingly beautiful black fur glimmering in the sunlight. The curves of its body made the girl think that it must be some female

figure.

Indeed, it was no human nor God, but a beast. A giant, three-to-four meter tall wolf covered in thick black fur. Its presence was so grand, so imposing, that anyone, no matter who they might be, would find themselves entranced by the sight of it. Its austere green eyes seemed to let it see through all things at a glance.

The girl knew about this beast. She had heard stories of the Abyssal Wolves.

“A Deep Dragon...?”

This forest was the last truly unexplored region on the Continent, and it was a sea of trees so vast that it covered one fifth of its total landmass. This was where the Deep Dragons made their home.

《Speak thy name.》

The voice echoed out so suddenly in the girl’s mind that it caught her off-guard. She could feel the Dragon staring into her very mind. She answered without a second thought.

“Fiena. I’m from Solitaine Village...”

The Dragon continued without waiting for her to finish.

《Thou art dead.》

“Eh...?”

Fiena heard the words, but couldn’t understand them. The Dragon began to explain.

《I have granted thee a second life.》

“You... saved me? But why—”

Just then, Fiena pressed her hand to her chest and let out a cry.

《I am of a race of warriors. I exist to protect this land. To this end, I will grant thee life, or if I must, then I will bestow death upon thee.》

“I was just... trying to thank you for...” *helping me*, Fiena had meant to say, but she realized that the Dragon had not saved her simply for a word of thanks. Instead, she decided it was best to let the beast explain its reasons in its own

words.

«Hark, little one. This is not such a thing that we can explain. But this thou must know. A life saved comes at no cheap cost.»

“...”

«I require thine assistance. Thou shalt become mine eyes and my ears. This is thy duty henceforth. I cannot grant thee much time to ponder this. Make thy decision.»

Fiena did not understand what the Dragon meant by this, but the words in her head had already ceased. The Dragon turned and began to walk back off into the forest.

Its every step was taken with grace, its figure sublime. It parted the lower treetops with its colossal figure and made no noise whatsoever — not even the sound of footsteps — as it vanished into the distance. The girl thought to herself that the sight of the shadowy beast fading away made it look less like a legendary Dragon warrior, and more like a solemn grim reaper.

She stood gazing in the Abyssal Wolf's direction even long after it had disappeared from sight.

Chapter I: Forest Maiden

“Game, set, and match,” said Orphen as he flicked Claiomh on the nose with a little stick, knocking her off balance and causing her to fall flat on her backside with a little yelp.

They were in a clearing in a forest with light shining down on them from between the treetops. The clearing was directly underneath a huge tree that had to be several meters tall and about a meter thick. They weren’t too far off the highway, but they were far enough off the road that it was unlikely any other travelers would run into them.

The scent of the forest in midsummer was pleasant, but Claiomh’s expression as she lay on the ground was anything but. Both the purple sweatshirt and the short spats she wore were items of clothing that she had just recently bought from a nearby city along the road.

She seemed to be upset that her brand new spats were already covered in dirt. She glared at Orphen, but he just laughed it off.

Orphen was a cynical-looking Black Sorcerer, about twenty years of age. Between his black hair, his black eyes, and his body being of average build, he wasn’t the kind of person who stood out in any particular way. Even his clothes were mostly black, apart from the silver pendant he wore around his neck — a one-legged dragon wrapped around a downwards-pointing sword. He had a sharp, almost dangerous look about his eyes, although if one were to pass him on the street it might look more like he was just constantly squinting.

He flipped the stick he was holding in his hand and caught it by the other end with a practiced motion.

“Looks like I win the bet. Any objections?”

“...No,” pouted Claiomh. It pained her to admit that she had been bested.

Claiomh was a seventeen year old girl with brilliant, golden blond hair grown down to her waist. Her eyes were as clear as the bright blue sky, and paired with her brilliant blond hair they made her look almost like the daughter of a family of nobles. In reality, however, she was merely part of a well-to-do

merchant family. That said, she had mentioned once before to Orphen that her family had supposedly branched off from nobles some generations ago.

In contrast to Orphen's stick, Claiomh's weapon was her favored sword with a special guard on the blade to prevent anyone from getting injured. She tucked her sword back in its sheath and wiped the dirt from her spats as she rose to her feet. She was clearly dissatisfied with the outcome of their bout.

"I don't get it! How could I not land a single hit?! I can't believe it! I *won't* believe it!"

"Believe it or not, I still won," said Orphen, tossing the stick away over his shoulder. He scratched his head in disbelief at the girl's temper tantrum.

"A bet is a bet, and I won under *your* conditions. Whoever hits their opponent with their weapon of choice gets one point, with the match being best out of ten. The loser has to follow a single command from the winner. Right?"

"I remember the *rules*, thank you very much! How could I forget after you dodged every last one of my attacks?!"

Claiomh stamped her feet in frustration, covering her sneakers in dirt.

"What I don't get is *how* you managed to dodge all of that! It doesn't make sense. I should've nicked you at least *once*, right?!" she fumed, glaring daggers at Orphen all the while. "I'll have you know that I'm pretty confident in my swordplay —" she tried to continue, but Orphen cut her off.

"Look," he said, clearly exasperated, "my skills are on a whole different level from an ordinary student. For what it's worth, I was trained in combat at the Tower of Fangs, remember?"

As he spoke, Orphen held his silver pendant aloft. The spread-winged dragon pendant served as proof that one had been acknowledged as an expert in Black Sorcery by the Tower of Fangs, the most prestigious Sorcerers' Academy on the Continent. Simply being given this pendant meant that that person had been acknowledged as a true elite among elites.

"They trained me in everything from how to use all sorts of weapons, to how to fight against people wielding those same weapons; they taught me all forms of self-defense and how to make snap judgments on the fly. What I'm saying is,

I've spent a lot more years studying this kinda thing than you have."

"Oho? So you're telling me you provoked me into a challenge you knew I had no way of winning, gambling a reward that you knew you would win, and you planned all of this against an innocent little girl?"

"You know something? You're *really* starting to sound more and more like Volkan by the day," Orphen muttered. He could hear Claiomh clicking her tongue at that remark.

Orphen sighed and continued: "Besides, I didn't come up with that bet, *you* did."

"Alright, already!" whined Claiomh. She slapped one fist against her chest as if provoking Orphen even further. "Go on then! I'm at your bidding. Go make me pick weeds or wash plates, I'm a slave to your one command!"

"About that... Don't bother. Really, please don't."

Orphen knew better than to ask anything of Claiomh. He had learned this the hard way over their journeys thus far. Claiomh, though, was a sharp girl. She could tell that Orphen was thinking something rude about her.

"Why'd you say it like that, huh? Are you saying I'm unreliable? You saying you can't trust me to do what you ask?"

"Pretty much, yeah," said Orphen without missing a beat.

He turned around and went to make his way back to the wagon that they had parked just a little ways off the highway. Claiomh was quicker. She circled around and got in front of Orphen, cutting off his path. She got right up in his face and thrust one finger against his chest accusingly.

"Whaddya mean by that, eh?!"

Orphen could feel his eye twitching just thinking about it.

"You wanna know what I mean by that? Fine! I'll tell you what I mean by that! Do you even *remember* any of the messes you've made in the past?! How about when I asked you to fix up my shirt, huh?!"

"Wha— That's a false accusation! That wasn't my fault! *You* were the one who told me to fix your shirt, as if I'm expected to know how to sew just

because I'm a woman! Don't you go forcing your chauvinistic beliefs on me you weak-minded little misogynistic—!"

"Where the hell did you pick up that kinda vocabulary?! And you're twisting the facts to fit your own convenient little logic! I only asked you to help out a little because you kept whining about having nothing to do in the back of the wagon!"

"I'm not twisting any facts!"

"Oh yeah? Then answer me this: why'd you deliberately dig out that handkerchief that you *knew* was precious to me and try to use *that* to fix the hole in my shirt, huh?!"

When Orphen asked that, Claiomh's attitude visibly changed. She withdrew her finger and broke eye contact with him.

"It was just the first thing I found lying around, that's all!"

"As if!" snapped Orphen.

The handkerchief in question was a hand-sewn gift he had received as a birthday present when he was still a boy. It had been given to him by a girl he had always looked up to as an older sister figure, so it held a lot of sentimental value for him. There had been plenty of other scraps of cloth that Claiomh could have used to fix up his shirt instead, so Orphen was convinced that she had picked that specific handkerchief on purpose just to harass him.

"Alright, so what about that time I asked you to take care of Majic when he was bedridden with the cold?! You flipped the basin of water all over him and drenched his blanket and sleeping bag completely! The poor kid got even *more* sick! Or hey, let's talk about that time I asked you to help me find a book in the library, shall we?! You yelled 'I've found it!' at the top of your voice and then ripped out the damned pages!"

"Everyone at my school always did that when they were looking for stuff in the library! Got a problem with that?!"

"Of course I do! And hell, let's not forget the worst incident of all — the time I asked you to go *shopping for food*! What in blue blazes was going on in that fairyland little head of your that you bought a fucking *enchanted bedpan*

instead?! Was that your way of telling me to drink piss?!"

"Th-that was an honest mistake, I swear!"

"How do you even *make* a mistake like that?! And this is all only the tip of the iceberg! I swear, you're just...!"

The tone in Orphen's voice suddenly changed, and he gripped Claiomh by both shoulders, staring her straight in the face.

"Be honest with me. Just tell me you're doing it on purpose. Please. For the sake of my sanity. I'm really losing my mind here."

Claiomh was taken aback. She didn't know how to respond.

"It's... r-really nothing to *cry* over, is it?"

"Of course I feel like crying. Day after day after day you torment me in all these ridiculous ways, and day after day after day you're making me lose my temper. I have to think you're doing it on purpose or I'd go stark-raving mad by now," said Orphen, heaving a big, heartfelt sigh.

Claiomh, unabashed, took a step backwards and held up one finger with a sparkle in her eyes.

"My daddy used to say that people who butt heads with each other all the time are the people who understand each other best in the world♥"

"In that case, I don't *want* to understand! I want to *stop* understanding! Right this instant!"

Orphen flung both of his hands into the air in a hysterical fit. In response, Claiomh seemed to be trying to come up with a way to bluff her way out of it.

"Oh, that's right. My daddy also said that life is just a series of fun little mishaps."

"I'd prefer a peaceful life *without* any mishaps, if it's all the same..." muttered Orphen, utterly defeated.

Done venting, Orphen placed his hand on top of Claiomh's head the way he always did out of habit.

"Aww, c'mon. Don't be such a sourpuss."

“Whose fault do you think it is that I’m acting like this...?”

“Daddy also said that it takes a whole lifetime to find all of a person’s faults, and that the moment you find the last of them that person’ll kill you. He told me that just three weeks before he died.”

“Fine, enough of your dad’s famous last words. Geez, I wish I could’ve met this eccentric guy while he was still alive. I’ve got a thing or two I’d like to have taught him myself,” cursed Orphen, clearly fed up with it all.

He took his hand off Claiomh’s head and pat her on the back, leading her leisurely back towards the wagon.

Claiomh took this as a sign that she had been forgiven (which couldn’t be further from the truth) and spoke up in jovial tones.

“C’mon, chin up. You’ve been pushing yourself too hard lately, that’s where all this stress is coming from. Hey, I know! Since I lost our bet, how about I give you a massage?”

“You? Give *me* a massage?”

“What’s with that tone of voice?! You get to have a pretty girl like me give you a massage! Aren’t you happy about that?”

“I dunno, Claiomh. Knowing you, I feel like you might pull out a bunch of needles and start stabbing me using ‘acupuncture massage’ as an excuse.”

“Do. You. Want. The. Massage. Or. Not?!” said Claiomh, spinning her head around to lock eyes with Orphen who had been walking behind her.

Orphen turned her head back around and said: “Alright, sure. Why not?”

Just then, something crossed his mind. Something he had forgotten to ask. He felt a sense of unease welling up from within as he called out to the girl walking just ahead of him.

“By the way, what were you gonna make me do if you won the bet?”

“Hmm? Oh, nothing special, really. I just thought, y’know, our wagon’s interior is pretty dull, right? Well, I thought the head of a Guancia Crusher Beast might look good stuffed and hung up on one side. So I thought I’d go ask you to hunt one of them.”

“...You have any idea how crazy strong those things are? And all I get is a lousy *massage*? I guess I should’ve known, really...”

Orphen sounded completely and utterly defeated, while Claiomh was as cheery as ever. Apparently she thought of Orphen as some sort of unparalleled superhuman who could take on wild beasts with his bare hands, rip their heads off, and mount them on a wagon with as much effort as it would take for her to give him a massage. Still, he realized that it was probably far too late to change her perception of him by now.

And so they passed their time as usual, unaware that they had stepped foot into the last refuge of the Great Warriors: Fenrir’s Forest.

Unbeknownst to them, they had just walked right into the sacred land of Valhalla.





“I knew this was a big forest, but dang, it really is *huge*, huh?”

A boy stood there in the middle of the forest with a thick paper map in one hand mumbling to himself. It was a general map of the Kiesalhima Continent and the surrounding sea. The forest in question was called Fenrir’s Forest, and it covered about one fifth of the Continent’s landmass, effectively splitting it into two halves — East and West.

“All sorts of animals and plant life thrive in this forest...”

The boy was reading off little comments scrawled in one corner of the map. He was a fifteen year old young boy with blond hair and pale green eyes. Though he seemed to have his wits about him, he was also rather feminine and charming for his age. He wore a black shirt and black leather pants, which even he could tell didn’t suit him very well.

Still, he thought to himself, *I’ll grow into the look eventually.*

At least, he’d like to think he would. Maybe one day. When he became a first-rate Sorcerer, perhaps.

“According to legend, a Goddess lives in the heart of this forest, protected by various powerful Dragon races...”

Still muttering away to himself, the boy raised his head and took a look around. The forest was rich with greenery, so brilliant it made his breath catch in his throat.

“Oh?” the boy raised his voice. “There’s even springs out here, huh?”

There were no rivers nearby, and walking through the marsh was dangerous, so he had avoided any of that sort of terrain. Since there was none of that around, he guessed that this must be a natural freshwater spring.

Wedged right in the middle of thick trees and undergrowth, the spring seemed to split the woods right open. The surface of the water was as still as could be, like a big beautiful mirror right there on the ground. It was so large, though, that it could almost be called a lake. Underwater plants and such covered the bottom of the lake beautifully. Between the bright blue sky and the

pure green spring, the sight was truly something beautiful to behold.

The boy walked up to the water's edge and gently stroked the surface with one finger. The once-still lake was suddenly alive with countless ripples spreading out before him. Amused, the boy leaned over to get a better look at the plants at the bottom of the lake. Just then...

—*Flop*—

The boy heard something fall to the ground behind him. He turned around to find a several-meter-long giant snake staring him in the face. It had dropped down from one of the trees and caught him off-guard.

He felt a chill run down his spine. Without thinking, he raised one hand and said "How do you do?"

To return the boy's greeting (not really) the snake reared its head and made to attack. The black snake's long body looked almost as if one of the trees had come to life.

Out of pure reflex, the boy raised both hands to his chest and inhaled deeply. With the image solidified in his mind, he wrung out every last bit of air from his lungs with a tremendous yell: "I release thee, Sword of Light!"

A beam of heat and light shot out of the boy's hands and hit the snake right in the lower jaw, true to his aim. Upon contact, it burst into flames and sent the now-headless snake flying. It fell at the foot of a tree some distance away. The boy looked down at it, but kept his guard up until the headless body stopped writhing. Satisfied, the boy let out a sigh of relief.

"This forest is about as dangerous as it looks, huh?" the boy said, not a hint of caution in his voice. He had hoped he sounded at least a little grown up compared to how he used to be.

As he wiped the sweat from his brow, he went over what had just happened in his head once more. He decided to try reenacting it.

"Spin, raise my hands, and... I release thee, Sword of Light... Like that."

The boy grinned to himself with his hands outstretched before him.

"That was pretty good. Master probably would've moved just like that. I'll

need to try and keep that reaction in mind.”

Satisfied with his work, the boy analyzed his surroundings once more. He knew it was dangerous to use fire-based spells in a forest, but with the humidity in the midsummer air, it was unlikely that a wildfire was going to break out from just a single spell. That said, if anything *did* happen to catch fire, it would be a nightmare to try and keep the blaze under control.

While he was going over the pros and cons of his moves just now, he heard a voice nearby.

“A Sorcerer...”

“Huh?”

The boy turned to search for the owner of the voice. When he found the person, his jaw dropped.

It was a woman — a young girl, rather — standing just a few meters away by the water’s edge. She looked to be roughly about the same age as the boy himself. Her eyes reflected a strong will, but it was more than just that...

She’s holding back some kinda weird strength... She almost looks like a wounded animal driven back into a corner...

He didn’t know what made him think this, and it certainly wasn’t what had him surprised.

The girl kept staring at him with a hint of shock in her eyes. She would probably look much cuter with a smile, the boy thought to himself. Her wavy hair looked as though it had been straightened on purpose, trailing halfway down her back. What was strange about the girl was the outfit that she was wearing. It was a light, almost frilly-looking yukata-like outfit that clung to her body. The outfit was slightly large on her, such that if a strong breeze came along the boy thought he might be able to see right under her clothes. Such an outfit was completely at odds with the scenery of the forest around her, and the boy couldn’t help but wonder why she was dressed like that.

Is she supposed to be some kind of... Shrine Maiden? the boy thought to himself, but that just made her seem all the more out-of-place.

While the boy was pondering the meaning of her outfit, she was the first to call out to him.

“You’re a Sorcerer, aren’t you?”

“Huh? Oh, umm, well, not quite yet. I’m still just an apprentice, you see,” said the boy, clearly flustered.

The girl — the Maiden? — tilted her head in confusion. She turned to look at the beheaded snake’s corpse and raised an eyebrow.

“You have... that much power... and you’re only an apprentice?”

“To tell the truth, it usually doesn’t work that well. Now, my Master on the other hand, *he’s* the impressive one.”

“I see... So there are others with you...” the girl muttered as she gazed off into the distance.

They both fell silent, and the boy found himself at a loss.

This girl feels... transient, somehow. Maybe partly because of her weird outfit, but still.

With nothing to lose, the boy picked up where the conversation had trailed off.

“Umm, by the way, you — oh, right. What’s your name?”

“Fiena...”

“Fiena? That’s a lovely name.”

Seeing that the boy wasn’t used to giving flattery, the girl giggled at him without so much as a change in her expression.

“Thank you,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“Me? I’m Majic.”

“Do you have any connection with any nobles, by any chance?” Fiena asked, her gaze fixed on Majic’s blond hair. The reason for this was simple: you didn’t see many commoners with blond hair on the Continent.

“Me? No, I don’t even know any nobles. This is just my natural hair color,”

said Majic. He realized that the same explanation for his hair would hold true even if he *had* been of noble birth, but this was just how he had always explained it to people. Most of the time, they just took him at his word.

Fiena walked towards Majic, and Majic decided there was no harm in approaching her, either.

Still walking, she asked: “What brings you here to the backwoods? This place is cut off from the human world...”

Majic watched as her outfit fluttered in the air and tried to come up with a response.

“I was just out on a walk,” he said. “I got a bit lost, though.”

As he spoke, he folded up his useless map and slipped it back into his pocket. Fiena walked up so close that Majic could’ve reached out and touched her.

“I see... In that case, I’ll lead you back to the highway. This forest is dangerous. The people who wander in here, they see... dreams.”

“Thanks, that’s a big help. What do you mean by ‘dreams,’ though?”

Majic repeated the word as though it didn’t seem to fit with the rest of her explanation. Fiena simply drooped her shoulders without answering.

“By the way, I was just curious,” said Majic in a carefree tone of voice, “but what are you doing all the way out here, anyway?”

The girl’s answer was immediate. It was as if she had been waiting for him to ask that exact question.

“My power has its roots in this ‘forest.’ I can never leave here.”

“...Huh?”

Fiena continued with a serious expression on her face.

“I can only use my power in the ‘forest,’ the way you used your power earlier, for example.”

“You have some kinda powers, too?”

The girl nodded.

“That’s right. Except, I don’t control my power... My power controls me.”

“I kinda figured from the clothes, but... you really are a Shrine Maiden then, huh?”

Majic still seemed half-doubtful as he walked along besides the girl. The Church that worshiped the Weird Sisters had no such things as ‘Shrine Maidens’ — the Goddesses themselves played that role, according to Church Priests. In short, the very fact that this girl was a Shrine Maiden meant that her religion was different from that of the Kimluck Church — a rarity in this day and age.

Master wouldn’t call them ‘rare’ though, just ‘backwater’ or ‘superstitious.’

It didn’t really matter to Majic what a person’s religion was. Just so long as people didn’t go blabbering on for eight whole hours about how their bedroom walls literally had ears and were spying on them (as a girl in his class had once made him sit through...) then he saw no real harm in it. Besides, Fiena definitely didn’t *seem* mentally unstable.

“You must have it rough. Not that I’ve ever met a Shrine Maiden before,” said Majic, still carefree as ever.

“It’s fine. Thanks to that, I was able to acquire this power, after all...” said Fiena in cold, hushed tones.

“Power, huh...” muttered Majic, crossing his hands behind his head. “I mean sure, it’s handy, but you can live without it.”

“Not all of us can...”

Fiena’s vague words were lost on Majic.

“You said you were traveling with companions, right?” she continued. “They must be reliable people.”

“Well... one of them is,” said Majic, picturing his master, Orphen, in his head.

Fiena’s expression turned a shade darker. “I don’t have anyone to rely on... So instead, I just do others’ bidding.”

“Huh...?” Majic had no idea what the girl was hinting at. She didn’t seem to be making any sense. How were those things connected? Did it have to be one or the other?

With doubts welling up in Majic's mind, the girl suddenly turned around and changed the topic completely.

"You came from outside, right? The outside world?"

"The outside world' is a bit of a stretch, but yeah, we only just arrived in this forest."

Fiena's expression seemed somehow lighter now, as did her long black hair flowing in the wind.

"What's it like out there? Did you pass through Solitaine Village on your way here?"

"No, not yet. I think we're still heading in that direction. We came from the south."

"The south... Which villages were down there, again? Did you pass through Arrabald, Kink Hall, or maybe even Raindust?"

"We just left Kink Hall not long ago. You really seem to know your way around these parts."

"I've lived around here all my life."

"I see..."

Majic was slightly startled at how Fiena suddenly seemed so much like any other girl her age now that the topic had changed. Not wanting to lose that mood, he pulled out the map he had been looking at earlier and spread it out in front of himself.

"We came here from Totokanta. We've been following the highway for most of the journey so far, so we've passed through Alenhatam and took a small detour to take care of some things in Kink Hall. We've been on the road for... about a month and a half now, I guess?"

Fiena brushed up against Majic's elbow as she leaned over to take a closer look at the map. The girl struck Majic as seeming not all that bothered about 'personal space,' but he wasn't really complaining.

"If you keep following that course, it'll take you straight to the Tower of Fangs. With your skills, I'm sure you'll make it in no problem," said Fiena, taking

note of Majic's very 'Sorcerer' all-black fashion sense. Majic shrugged and folded the map away.

"That's not it. My Master is, umm, well... a moneylender. We're only traveling right now so he can get a couple of dwarfs to pay their debt back. At least, that's Master's excuse," Majic added, clearly doubtful of Orphen's excuse. "We're gonna be stopping off at the Tower along the way, but only to get me registered with them. I'm not gonna be studying there or anything."

"Eh? Then why bother registering?"

"The Tower provides affiliated Sorcerers with financial aid, apparently. Master said it should help us live easy for at least three months. It's just like him to only ever think of the money, I swear," sighed Majic.

Fiena giggled. "I thought your teacher was supposed to be some incredible Sorcerer?"

"He is. He's an amazing *Sorcerer*, but that's about it," explained Majic. "He doesn't really talk about that past much, and when he does, it sounds like he's just making most of it up. He says he was basically guaranteed a position as Court Sorcerer before he left, or that he was the top student of his year, or all sorts of nonsense. He may be amazing, but not *that* amazing."

"What if it's all true, though?" the girl asked, clearly teasing him.

"*If* everything my Master has ever bragged about is true," said Majic sarcastically, "then I'm the only student of the greatest Black Sorcerer on the Continent. That's way too good to be true."

"It is," Fiena agreed, "but wouldn't it be just incredible?"

"It really wouldn't!" Majic was quick to disagree. Anyone that amazing would definitely be a very strict teacher, after all.

"...You don't aim very high in life, do you?"

The girl's expression had clouded over again. She seemed to be lost in thought about something.

So she goes back into 'Maiden mode' whenever the conversation turns serious, huh?

Having figured this out, Majic decided that he'd try to keep their chats light-hearted. She seemed more fun to talk with as an ordinary girl, after all.

"You said you're from around here, right? Umm... Fiena, was it?"

The girl nodded, so Majic kept a smile on his face and continued: "Whereabouts do you live? One of those villages nearby? I mean, it's not like you live *in the forest*, after all, right?"

Carefree as ever, Majic had been thinking about asking Orphen if they could drop by Fiena's village along the way. But the girl shook her head, and responded in her Shrine Maiden voice.

"There's a village in the forest. It's not on any maps."

"Eh? Really?"

The girl pointed back off into the forest. "It's where those who believe in the Forest's Power reside... we call it the Sacred Heart."

"The Sacred Heart...?" Majic repeated the name aloud.

Now, not all minor religions were restricted to remote villages or backwater areas. Even a big city like Totokanta had a local cult or two. This was only natural. Religions didn't just spring up overnight, after all. Even the Kimluck Church was a minor religion at first, it just gained many more followers than most over the hundreds of years since its founding.

Still, Majic couldn't help but feel that these minor religions all seemed to share one point in common — a terrible naming sense.

'Sacred Heart' sounds less like a village and more like a stuffed toy, thought Majic, though he wasn't so boorish as to say this in front of Fiena.

"Would you like to come visit?" Fiena asked out of the blue.

"I mean, a village in the forest does sound kinda interesting..." said Majic, trying to work out if that was really a good idea or not.

That was, until Fiena's next words completely threw him for a loop.

"There aren't many girls our age, so I'm sure you'll be popular with the boys."

Majic froze in place. "Come again?"

“I mean, you’re very pretty and all. I even mistook you for a noble’s daughter at first. Who knows? They might even want to make you into our second Shrine Maiden.”

Majic’s legs gave out beneath him. Suddenly a lot of things made sense.

“...Do I really look *that* girly?”

He had to pull himself back to his feet from the shock, and Fiena had fared no better. The moment she realized her mistake, her face turned as red as a tomato.

“Y-you’re a *boy*?!”

“...My voice hasn’t broken yet, so I can kinda understand, but... Really? Ouch...” muttered Majic, genuinely hurt by how long it had taken for Fiena to notice.

Fiena seemed to feel almost as bad about the whole misunderstanding, simply repeating the same two words “I’m sorry!” over and over for a while.

“I really am sorry about that. I’m sure they’ll still welcome you, though! ...We’ll scrap the Shrine Maiden idea, though.”

“Urk... A-anyway, I’m surprised there’s a village in the middle of the woods. That sounds like something out of a novel,” remarked Majic.

“I know, right?” agreed Fiena. “I was surprised when I first found out, too. I wasn’t born there, you see. I moved there... about half a year ago...”

“R-right...”

Majic had taken note of Fiena’s drastic change in expression towards the end of her explanation. She stopped and turned to face him, this time more seriously than ever before.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Fiena carefully scanned their surroundings before replying.

“I’m sorry,” she said simply.

“...Sorry for what?” he asked.

Majic stopped, too, and scanned their surroundings. He couldn’t see anything

out of the ordinary, but...

“If you run now, you might still escape...” she muttered, just barely audible.

But it was too late. Twigs snapped, bushes rustled, and a man spoke up.

“Compassion is all well and good, Fiena, but please don’t think of betraying us now.”

“Wha—?!”

Majic spun to face the owner of the voice, which was when he noticed a tall man walking out from behind a tree.

Following this first man, another two men appeared, then a third. These others looked like peasants and farmers. They were armed with clubs and hatchets.

The words ‘badger game’ crossed Majic’s mind.

“Wh-what’s going on?” he asked Fiena.

She didn’t reply to him. Instead, she turned to protest to the tall man.

“We should have let him go. He said he has companions with him. He could have led us straight to them.”

“And let them work together to escape? Leave the thinking to us, Fiena.”

The man strode casually over to Fiena’s side. His face was pointed and narrow, he sported a short beard, and could easily have been anywhere between thirty and forty years old. While he was dressed like a hill climber, his outfit was decidedly more minimalist than that. Unlike the others armed with their crude weapons, he looked more like a soldier — albeit unarmed.

He kept flashing a dangerous grin the whole time, focusing more on Fiena than on Majic for some reason.

“Sorcerers must face divine wrath. We can’t allow a single one of them to escape.”

“And besides —”

This new voice threw Majic off, because it had come from none of the peasants — it had come from directly behind him.

He spun around to face a younger, seedier-looking man in a worn-out shirt and a leather ranger's jacket. The ranger's jacket should have had a badge on the front, but there were traces of the stitching left where that had been peeled off with a knife. These jackets were covered with pockets for knives, stakes, or various other tools, but this man was carrying none of those things.

Instead, he had a single weapon — a longsword in a sheath attached to his belt. Not the kind of weapon your standard ranger would be equipped with, to say the least.

He smirked a mischievous smirk when Majic finally noticed him, and deliberately left a pause before continuing.

"We sent men out to *welcome* those companions a little while ago."

The taller man took hold of the conversation again.

"This forest belongs to *us*. Intruders won't be let off lightly."

"Fenrir's Forest is supposed to be under the joint management of the Kimluck Church and the royal family!" Majic spat out without thinking. He regretted it the very next moment, when the peasant men's glares intensified. Majic thought for sure they were about to pounce on him when, instead, the tall soldier-looking man burst out laughing.

"Hahaha! You think that lot stand a chance against us?!"

"That lot'? But they're two of the biggest —"

Majic had been about to mention the very obvious fact that the Kimluck Church's influence covered most of the Continent, and that the Union of Lords who controlled the royal family had the greatest forces of any political group, but the man cut him off with a statement too absurd to think him sane.

"Who cares?! We have *Fiena* on our side!" the man yelled, grabbing Fiena from behind by the shoulders. Majic could tell that even she was frightened by the man's reaction. The peasant men also seemed on the verge of laughter.

It's useless, thought Majic, this entire religion is insane. Guess I don't have to hold back against them after all they've said now. Master would probably react the same way.

“In that case, should I yell really loud?” asked Majic somewhat nonchalantly.

“...What good’ll that do?”

Majic had been expecting the taller soldier-looking man to respond, but it was the one behind him in the ranger jacket instead. Not that it mattered to him either way as long as he could distract them.

“I’m just making sure you won’t jump me if I start yelling,” the boy continued unabashed.

“*What?*” blurted the fake ranger. He couldn’t believe his ears.

“It’s too late to beg for mercy, boy. We’ve got you surrounded,” said the fake soldier.

“Yeah, I can see that,” said Majic, casting his gaze to the treetops above with as innocent an expression as he could muster. “This is a heck of a mess I’m in. Can you blame me for wanting to scream in frustration a little?”

“Then by all means, scream away. Nobody’s coming to save you.”

“Alright. Then...” Majic inched ever-so-slightly closer to Fiena, trying not to make any sudden movements. He inhaled deeply and then yelled at one treetop in particular: “Master, you idiot! Stop making me eat Claiomh’s cooking!!”

After wringing every last ounce of breath from his lungs, Majic grabbed Fiena by the arm and pulled her away from the fake soldier.

“...What was *that* supposed to be?”

“Like I said, I’ve got a lot of frustrations pent up,” Majic shrugged and grinned.

The treetops retaliated with their own anger... in the form of a large black falling object.

“Uwaaah!” the peasants yelled in unison.

A giant snake had fallen from a tree without warning. It had been lurking around, curious at the creatures all huddled up on the ground, when the branch supporting its weight had snapped, dropping it right into their midst. Although the snake had no way of knowing that the branch had been broken by Majic’s

impromptu spell.

“Uwooooh!!”

The fake soldier seemed less shocked and more enraged at the snake that had fallen on him. The fake ranger and all of the peasants panicked and rushed to get the thing off of their leader. One of them yelled “Mister MacDougal!” which was apparently the fake soldier’s name, but Majic didn’t stand still long enough to find out.

“Let’s go!” he said to Fiena instead. He took her by the hand and made a mad dash away from the group of men.

“What was that...?” was all she could ask in her confusion.

“Sorcery. I made up a spell and cast it on that tree branch. I had to yell *something* to make it work, though.”

Human Sorcerers were heavily limited in what they could do compared to Dragons, because humans had to use their own voice as the medium. If a Sorcerer wanted to cast a spell on a distant target, then first their voice had to reach that far. And because one’s voice is just reverberations in the air which would eventually fade, so, too, was human sorcery transient by nature.

On the other hand, as long as a Sorcerer’s voice reached its target, it didn’t particularly matter what they said. As long as their mental image of the desired effects was strong enough when the spell was cast, they could yell whatever they wanted. That said, yelling utter nonsense would be enough to break anyone’s concentration mid-spell, so it wasn’t a particularly reliable method.

Nonetheless, it had been all Majic had needed for something simple like breaking a tree branch. He cast his gaze back to the men entangled with the snake, and to Fiena, whom he felt he needed to save from them.

“Look, just run! They’ve sent people after Master as well! I’m sure he’s fine, but *we’re* not, so we have to meet up with him!”

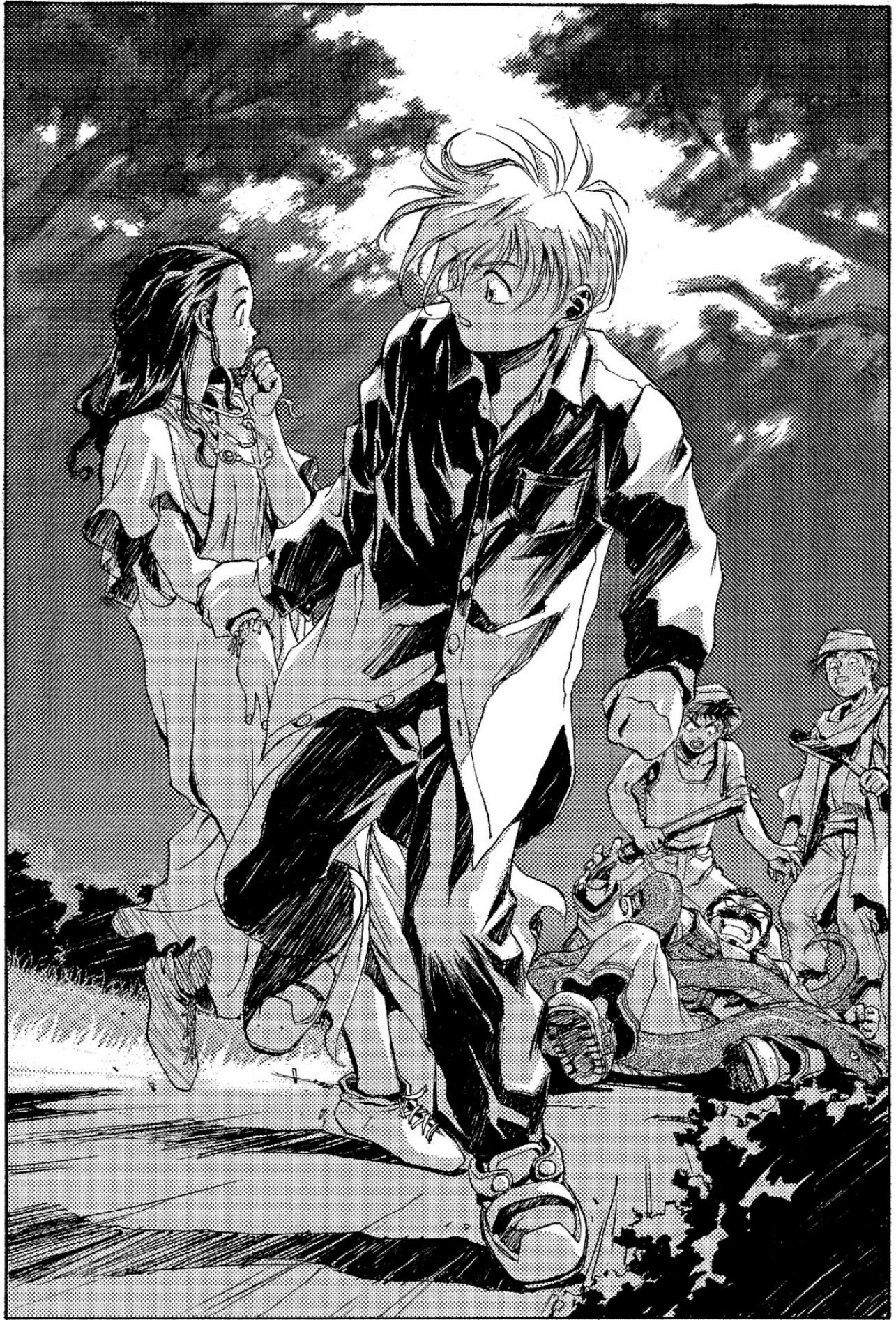
“But —” Fiena looked down at her own arm as though it belonged to someone else. “I can’t!”

“*What?!*” Majic screamed without thinking. “Look, my spells hardly ever work

that well! If we don't run now, I won't be able to get us another chance like this!"

"Then why not run away by yourself?!" asked Fiena, confused by Majic's actions. Majic was even more confused by Fiena's reaction, though, considering how frightened she had been by that MacDougal person. He refused to let go of her hand.

"Why would I leave you alone?! I need to get you out of here, or you're gonna be stuck playing Shrine Maiden for them your whole life!"



“Huh...?”

Fiena made a face like it was the first time anyone had ever offered to *help* her before, when...

—*Crack!*—

A dry sound rang out behind them. Majic had thought that maybe Fiena had hit her head against a branch, but when he turned back to check on her, that didn't seem to be the case. She didn't seem to be hurt, but for some reason, she refused to run any further. She had gone pale in the face, having recognized what that noise was. Majic, still gripping her by the hand, had no choice but to stop, too.

“What was that...?”

Majic looked back to where the noise had come from. It hadn't been something hitting Fiena. It had come from further away than that. In fact, it had come from right around where the men had been wrestling with the snake... which, strangely, had grown motionless atop MacDougal. Its head had been beaten in by *something*. MacDougal shoved the large animal's corpse off of himself and rose to his feet, shaking with rage.

Majic was too busy trying to figure out *what had just happened* to even think to run away. How had a human managed to overpower a snake that size? How had he managed to *crush part of its skull* like that?

What the hell...? Why do I suddenly feel so... afraid?

Majic was afraid. Afraid of his seemingly-unarmed opponent's unknown method of attack.

MacDougal looked straight at the frightened boy and held out his right hand. He was gripping some small, black object. It didn't look like a religious symbol of any sort. It almost looked *metallic*, like a piece of machinery from some kind of farming tool.

MacDougal squeezed the object, and...

—*Crack!*—

The metal object flashed brightly for a split second. But what shocked Majic

was something far more *physical* than that. A sharp, blinding pain in his left side. It felt like his entire body was screaming at him, all from one tiny little spot on his side. He fell to the ground without even the strength to shout in pain.

“Kyaaa!”

Fiena’s scream sounded awfully distant for some reason. Majic fell to the ground, and fell, and kept falling...

His back had hit the ground a long time ago, but still he continued to be assailed by a powerful feeling of vertigo. It felt like the ground was trying to swallow him whole.

“...”

“...! ...!”

“...!”

His vision was rapidly going white. He felt conscious of the fact that he was falling unconscious. He tried to make out what the people nearby were yelling about. All he could tell was that one of the voices belonged to MacDougal. The words didn’t string together in any way that made sense. They felt... *blurry*.

“...! ...!”

“...!”

He seemed to be arguing with someone. From the sound of the second voice, it was probably Fiena.

He kept falling. Endless vertigo. It consumed all of his senses one by one, and the last thing to go would be his very life, Majic reasoned. In which case, he’d stop falling before much longer.

He felt his body growing cold. In his last conscious moment, he finally made out some of MacDougal’s words. The man was standing over him.

“Heal the boy, Fiena.”

The girl’s response was immediate; too silent for MacDougal to hear, but just loud enough for Majic to make out.

“I was going to, anyway...!”

The voice was followed by a soft, warm sensation pressing up against his cold skin. It was probably Fiena's hand, but there was something more to it than that. Her hand was... abnormally warm. Abnormally *comforting*. It was as if that single hand was embracing his very being.

Endless vertigo... Fiena — Can't escape the 'Forest'... Shrine Maiden — controlled by her power... The snake's skull, crushed — a small, black, metallic object...

Majic's thoughts were in chaos, but he was finally able to recall why that sound and strange, metallic object had frightened him so much.

He knew what it was.

It was a handgun.

Chapter II: Deep Dragon

“Alright, so how do we take care of *these* jokers?”

Orphen crossed his arms and looked up at the five men hung from the large tree by their wrists before him. Orphen’s wagon was nearby, and the area around them was littered with their belongings. He and Claiomh had clearly been preparing to set up camp for the night when these assailants had leapt on them out of nowhere.

“That was horrible,” said Claiomh. Not at the fact they had been ambushed, but of how Orphen had mercilessly strung them up by the wrists.

“I’m not gonna hold back against a group of armed men who try to ambush a single guy and a teenage girl while they’re defenseless. And besides, *you* were the one who chopped up the first guy!”

“I didn’t *chop him up!* I mean... sure, he was crying when he almost lost most of his fingers... but how was *I* supposed to know it’d cut that deep?!”

Claiomh shook just remembering the gory sight of the man clutching at his half-severed fingers with the most anguished expression she had ever seen a grown man make.

Orphen sighed. “What would you have done if I wasn’t there to stick his fingers back on? Fucking hell,” he remarked, poking Claiomh in the shoulder. She had already changed back into her jeans in the wagon and was wearing a beige men’s shirt (in other words, more of Majic’s clothes), which she had been checking to make sure she hadn’t gotten any blood on while Orphen had been busy stringing their assailants up from the tree.

“As if that wasn’t enough, you were swinging a *sword* at people armed with sticks and rocks! The poor bastards didn’t stand a chance! After you maimed the first guy, I thought they were gonna run away!”

“Hee hee hee... Whose fault it is that I’ve turned into a real *wild* bitch then, eh?”

“Where the hell do you keep picking this stuff up...?”

Orphen sighed again as he lay his hand on Claiomh's head again, clearly fed up with her.

Claiomh wasn't about to let herself be made into the only villain on the scene, though.

"So, what about *you* then, huh? One guy tried to hit you with a stick and you *set the forest on fire!* I thought we were gonna burn to death!"

Claiomh swung her arm out to indicate the massive patch of ground where several trees had been completely uprooted and the ground scorched black from the intensity of the flames. Orphen tried to avert his gaze and, as if to justify his actions, said: "I was trying to protect you."

"A barefaced lie like that isn't gonna fly with me, mister!"

Claiomh turned away from Orphen with a little "hmph" and walked timidly towards her own sword, still sitting unsheathed on the ground a few meters away. She had dropped it in a panic when she saw the blood spurting from the man's hand where she had cut him. She stopped a meter away from it and turned back to Orphen.

"Umm, by the way..." she said, "do I *really* have to wipe the blood from it?"

"It's your sword," said Orphen accusingly.

"But... it's got blood on it!"

"Yeah, because you *cut* someone with it. Throw it away, for all I care. In fact, do that anyway."

"Making a delicate young lady wipe up the blood after the fact... Don't blame *me* if people start treating you like a sadist."

"It's a *sword!* *You're* the sadist for swinging that damned thing around!" snapped Orphen.

Claiomh gingerly lifted the sword's handle with her fingertips.

"'The elderly never forgive the shortcomings of the young... It's a sign that you're growing bitter with age.' An adagio by my father, uttered two hours before he died."

“You’re incorrigible, you know that?” muttered Orphen, moments before he turned his attention back to their *actual* enemies.

All five of them were out cold — or pretending to be out of fear of torture. Orphen wasn’t surprised. He might’ve done the same in their position. Claiomh, on the other hand...

Well, Claiomh was still gingerly poking at the handle of her sword, refusing to pick it up. She’d probably never *be* in that kind of helpless position in her entire life.

The girl in question was still muttering away to herself. “‘When a person stops talking is when they truly die.’ — By my old man, on his deathbed.”

“...Did your old man just spout these quotes his entire life, or what?”

“‘The only meaningful death is a death that leaves people with famous last words to remember them by.’ He left me with that one minute after the doctor declared him dead,” said Claiomh with a cheeky wink.

For the time being, she seemed to have decided to cover the sword’s blade with dirt and hope that’d be enough to wipe it off when she pulled it back out of the ground.



For the first time in what felt like forever, Dörtin felt himself *lucky*. He was so completely and utterly at peace that an onlooker could’ve mistaken the boy for someone who had just discovered the reason of life.

He was safe and sound. Not too hot nor too cold. He had food in his belly. Not a debt collector on his trail. Such a miraculous set of conditions had never once befallen him in all his life. He would normally have considered himself well-off just to have a single one of these things at a time.

Indeed, it was a divine miracle. He couldn’t help but shed a few tears every time his mind wandered - he had freedom to let his mind wander! - and that was when it hit him.

“...Is this what living a normal life is like?”

He shouldn’t have voiced that thought. It just made him feel empty inside,

and now was not the time for gloom. He turned his attention back to wiping the crystal ashtray in his hands with a cleaning cloth to put his mind back at ease.

Dortin was a dwarf from a place called Masmaturia on the southern tip of the Continent, standing at one hundred and thirty centimeters in height. He wore the traditional outfit of his people, a fur cloak (which he did not remove even indoors, as was dwarfen manners), and a pair of glasses with comically thick lenses. At seventeen years old, his short stature made him look rather young for his age compared to humans.

Dortin shot a look over his shoulder. The parlor room he was in the middle of cleaning was quite a refined little place. Perhaps because it was out in this little village in the middle of nowhere, or perhaps because of the way its owner had decorated it, it looked more like a small personal living room than a place to greet guests.

Dortin wasn't admiring the room, though, but rather keeping an eye on its other occupant.

"...Why is someone of *my* great status being made to do household chores?"

The second dwarf was lazily waving a feather duster around. He seemed to be under the impression that this was 'cleaning' the room, but in fact all he was really accomplishing with this was kicking all the dust back up into the air.

Dortin heaved a sigh and lay the crystal ashtray back down on the table.

"You've gotta clean it properly, bro, or it'll only take us even longer," he explained to his brother.

"*What?*" snapped the other boy, turning to meet Dortin's gaze. He was a boy with shaggy black hair and a cloak similar to Dortin's, but unlike his brother, he wore no glasses. Also unlike his brother was the sheathed sword hanging from his belt, which was rare to see in these times of peace with no major wars or conflicts to speak of.

The boy folded his arms, still holding the feather duster, and appeared to have an announcement to make.

"Now listen here, Dortin," he began.

“I’m listening,” sighed Dortin with a little nod.

“I’m the great Vulcano Volkan, the infamous Bulldog of Masmaturia! How does it make *any sense at all* to have a hero like myself on *cleaning duty*?!”

The boy calling himself Volkan thrust his finger out at Dortin, who stood there on the receiving end rubbing his temples to try and ward off the headache he could feel coming on.

“Alright, just calm down, would you?”

“*Calm down*, he says!” screeched Volkan. “How do you expect me to *calm down* when I’m being made to wave this ridiculous *thing* about like some common housemaid?! What of the many rivals I’ve vanquished to the netherworld?! They weep for me, Dortin! If they could see me now, they might even drown themselves to death in soy sauce!”

Volkan swung his fist at Dortin’s face, but stopped just a hair’s breadth short of the boy’s nose. When Dortin opened his eyes and looked up at his brother (though they were virtually the same height so he didn’t have to tilt his head back much) he saw that Volkan was crying manly tears for his so-called vanquished rivals.

Always one to try and read the mood even when he knew better, Dortin asked: “And which rivals would those be?”

“The first of many, the Red Demon who made Thirteenth Street in Totokanta his turf, the Red Devil, Dandy Coprise Junior!”

“...Oh yeah, the butcher’s pet dog. I remember you attacked him because you were jealous that a dog was eating pork sausages while we were stealing bread,” said Dortin vacantly. Volkan didn’t seem to notice as he continued yelling.

“And what of the Heavenly Black Overlord, Michael Magnolia Samuels?!”

“...Wasn’t that the crow you got into a fight over a copper coin with?”

“Dare I even mention his name?! Brought forth from the abyss with an intellect to rival even my own, the mad professor Doc Zeppel!”

“...Who? Oh, right! The talking myna bird. I told you not to bother stealing the

bird feed from its cage because it would taste horrible, but you just wouldn't listen."

"And who could ever forget the witch with a hundred lifeless servants, the Peerless Puppeteer, Mead Rain!"

"...Old Mrs. Mead who gave us candy for watching her puppet show to the end? You didn't even fight that one."

"..."

This actually threw Volkan slightly. A lone bead of sweat ran down the side of his face, but it only took him a flat five seconds to decide to continue with his tirade anyway.

"How would I ever be able to explain myself to them?!"

"You know what? I really don't think you could," *or that you even need to*, muttered Dörtin; that last part internally.

"Right?!" screeched Volkan, reinvigorated. He balled both hands up into fists and howled at the ceiling. "Could *you* ever face them like *this*?! With a *feather duster* in one hand, *humming away* while *cleaning* like a *newlywed housewife*?!"

"You don't have to emphasize every other word, I get it already..."

"Well *I* could certainly never face them like this! While we fought for different things, they were all proud warriors who died noble deaths! Meanwhile *I'm* stuck here waving a *feather duster* around like a —"

"You know, I just remembered. The nice old lady in the cafeteria said she'd bake us some pancakes if we finished our cleaning early."

"As I was saying, little brother, the key to dusting is *rhythm*! It's also important to remember to lay down sheets beforehand over anything you don't want getting dusty!"



Volkan changed his tune immediately and returned messily to work, ever easily swayed by undeserved rewards. Dortin heaved a sigh of relief and decided to do the same. He reached for the crystal ashtray that he hadn't finished polishing, but found only empty tabletop where it once was.

"Huh?"

Utterly mystified as to how an ashtray could just walk up and out of the room, Dortin scanned his surroundings to see where it could have fallen. That was when he noticed a strange lump in one of Volkan's pockets that hadn't been there a moment ago. The pocket-lump was coincidentally roughly about the size of a crystal ashtray.

When did he even have a chance to swipe that? Dortin could only wonder.

Nothing else about Volkan may be particularly impressive, but he could be unexpectedly deft whenever he felt like it.

Dortin decided to give up on the ashtray and polish the cigar clipper instead when the door opened behind him. He turned around thinking it might be the nice old lady from the cafeteria come to bring them snacks, but the tall, thin young man was decidedly not the cafeteria lady.

"Yo," the man called out cheerily. He wore a badge-less ranger's jacket over the top of a worn-out old shirt, and hung a sword (sharp and impressive, compared to Volkan's dull and somewhat pathetic little blade) from his belt.

"Oh, hey there, mister Salua," said Volkan, rather surprised at the man's sudden appearance. He even stopped his dusting and bowed his head to the man.

"I'm back," said Salua. He took a look around the room as though he were slightly tipsy and couldn't quite figure out where he was. It didn't seem like he was checking to make sure nothing had been stolen... or so Dortin wanted to believe, at least. When Salua failed to even notice the missing ashtray, Dortin almost heaved a sigh of relief.

"Volkan, was it?" Salua spoke up again to make sure he still had the boy's attention. "Your information was dead on the nose. We just got back from capturing some little Sorcerer brat out near the village."

“Ah, so that’s what brings you back so soon,” nodded Volkan in understanding.

Dortin pictured Majic’s face in his mind. Poor kid. Hopefully they hadn’t been too rough with him.

Volkan, on the other hand, didn’t seem to be worried in the least. His face took on an even more snake-like appearance than usual as he purred to Salua: “And what of the other Black Sorcerer? The one who so brazenly wears the mark of the Tower of Fangs around his neck?”

“We sent a different group out after ‘em. We haven’t heard back from ‘em yet, but I wouldn’t worry about it. We sent our five best men, and told them to make sure it was a perfect sneak attack. Anyway,” said Salua with a shrug before scratching his chin with one hand, “Boss man MacDougal was happy to learn your information wasn’t bunk, so he wants to thank ya. Gonna have to be after dinner, though. He looked like he *really* couldn’t wait to get playin’ with that little brat, so that’ll probably keep ‘im busy a while.”

After a slight pause: “...Wanna know just how much the boss man hates Sorcerers?”

“N-not particularly, no,” Dortin blurted out. Volkan, on the other hand, seemed *eager* to know the finer details.

Dortin wasn’t good with stories about the cruel or painful. They just made him feel bad.

Salua laughed in carefree tones. “Well, it ain’t for a lapdog like me to sniff into. Just you guys remember that if you’re plannin’ on stayin’ here as cleaners, then you’re best off just goin’ along with the boss’s hobbies — sorry, should probably call it his ‘religious doctrine’ or ‘divine commandments’ or whatever it is he’s callin’ it. Don’t let my bad habits wear off on ya now.”

And with that, Salua left the room behind. His shuffling footsteps could be heard drawing further and further away from the room, and when he was out of presumed earshot, Dortin spoke up once more.

“I really don’t think they’ll be able to take down that moneylender with just five men...”

“...”

Volkan ignored his little brother and got back to dusting the room.

“I want no part of this. *You’re* the one who let it slip that there were Sorcerers nearby. When that Sorcerer comes hunting for us, *you’re* taking all the blame, got it?”

“...I’m sure a sincere apology will settle everything nice and well,” said Volkan, his voice laden with fear.

Dortin wasn’t so optimistic. “That’s only *if* his student’s safe and fine, remember? If they torture the poor boy to death, then the moneylender will torture *us* to death.”

“Urk...”

Even Volkan was beginning to understand just how dire their situation was. Shaking in his boots, he almost even dropped his feather duster. With his back to Dortin, he fired off his next idea:

“There’s always the option of making a break for it.”

“And how are we gonna run from a village in the middle of the woods? There aren’t any paths or anything. We’d just get lost.”

Dortin sighed and turned to where a large map hung up on one of the walls.

The map was titled ‘The Last Refuge of the Great Warriors: Fenrir’s Forest’, and down in one corner was a little red circle with the words ‘The Sacred Heart village’ written next to it. That was where Volkan and Dortin were currently working as cleaners.



It was the middle of the night.

“Looks like Majic was caught right around... here,” said Orphen as he stuck his head out of a bush. Claiomh held onto his shoulder from behind, wearing a long-sleeved jacket made for protection against bladed weapons and the like. It must have been sweltering hot to walk around the woods dressed as heavily as that, but she must have thought it a good idea after they were ambushed just earlier that day.

Claiomh met Orphen's gaze as soon as he turned around to talk to her.

"Looks like it. This is definitely the spot that our prisoners mentioned, after you hung them upside down over a bonfire and tortured them with the smoke until they spilled the beans."

"...You got something to say, Claiomh?" asked Orphen with closed eyes.

"Not reeeaaally," said Claiomh as annoyingly as possible, "just that even if you're the cruelest, most inhuman sadist alive, and even if you end up turning the whole world into your enemy, I'll always be on your side, that's all♥"

"Alright. And? Whaddya want, some pocket change? 'Cause you're not getting any."

Orphen ignored Claiomh sticking her tongue out at him and closed his eyes once more, focusing on his sense of hearing. Besides Claiomh's shallow breathing, the woods were perfectly quiet. About as quiet as a forest at night would ever get, that is. He could still hear ambient noises like insects, animal footsteps, rustling leaves, and — because there was a village nearby — running water.

According to Orphen's internal body clock, it was just about midnight. It had taken them quite a while to find their way here from the highway, but it was still too early for them to go leaping into action.

Orphen opened his eyes, and the starlit village spread out before him. He couldn't spot any lookouts in the immediate vicinity, but being a village in the middle of a forest, it was impossible to tell just where they could have lookouts stationed. There were too many ideal places to count.

As for the buildings, there was no need for horses in the middle of the forest, so there weren't any stables. There were, however, a number of pigpens and what looked like huts for other domestic livestock. The villagers' houses were all of incredibly simple design, looking more like sheds than actual houses — apart from one large gymnasium-sized building in the center of the village, next to which stood a taller, thinner building. The pointed roof of the taller building resembled a church spire, and the building itself was probably meant to serve as a church, but there was one crucial difference: the symbol atop the spire was not that of the Kimluck Church, but rather...

“...A Dragon!” muttered Orphen.

Indeed, the little statue was unmistakably the figure from which Fenrir’s Forest got its namesake — that familiar wolf’s figure was even painted black, made as accurate to life as possible. Had it not been for the starlight, he might have overlooked it completely.

“Well that’s just fucking great,” he spat.

“What is?” asked Claiomh curiously.

Orphen pointed up at the wolf sculpture on the church spire.

“See the sculpture? That’s a Deep Dragon. If they’re worshiping something like that, it means this is a hidden village just full of people who believe in one of the Dragon Faiths.”

“I think you mentioned that once before,” said Claiomh, clearly missing the point.

Orphen rested his hand on Claiomh’s head and sighed. “Alright, look,” he said, “here’s the thing about Dragon Faiths. To them, Sorcerers are the worst of the worst — they hate us enough to want to kill us.”

Claiomh thought about this for a moment. “After what you did to those five who ambushed us, I can see why they’d react like that.”

“That’s not what I... Look, fine. The problem isn’t *me*, it’s *Majic*. If he’s been caught by these villagers, then they might just —”

Recalling that he was talking to Claiomh, Orphen bit his tongue. The poor lad would be lucky to make it out of the place after just a little bit of torture, but if he was especially unlucky, they could’ve stoned him to death already.

Orphen clenched his teeth. He knew now that he couldn’t afford to wait until morning to carry out his rescue plan. For all he knew, it might already be too late to save Majic.

Shit...

“I can’t believe that idiot got himself captured by ordinary humans. As soon as we bring him back, I’m drilling the basics of the basics right back into him.”

“You already made him do a thousand squats just the other day, and you can’t even do that many yourself. You made him cry, you know.”

“...You and me split the only can of peaches we had between us while he was crying and squatting, so you’re as guilty as I am.”

“Well, sure, but that wasn’t my point,” pouted Claiomh. “Anyway, Orphen, how come Dragon worshipers hate Sorcerers so much?”

Orphen kept silent for a moment as he surveyed the village. After a moment, he picked up their conversation in even more hushed tones.

“I told you before about all the different Dragon races and what makes them special, right?”

“Yup. You said they’re the races that stole the secrets of True Magic from the Gods.”

“Right.”

It all happened in the days of mythology — over a thousand years ago, according to the findings in several Dragon ruins. The omnipotent Gods lived on the Giants’ Continent, Jotunheim, with their all-powerful Magic at their disposal. Then, one day, six inferior — yet clever — races came along and each stole a fraction of the Gods’ Magic for their own, in the form of Dragon Sorcery. These most cunning of races went on to be known by the following names: War Dragons, Weird Dragons, Deep Dragons, Fairy Dragons, Red Dragons, and Mist Dragons.

“The six Dragon races fled Jotunheim to escape the wrath of the Gods, and that’s how they ended up here, on the Continent of Kiesalhima. From what we’ve found in ruins, it looks like they had a whole bunch of angry pursuers to shake off, though. The Gods sent their servants and familiars to hunt the Dragons as relentlessly as possible. After finally escaping all of this, the Dragons settled in with this as their new homeland. Hundreds of years passed before our human ancestors also made it to the land of Kiesalhima. That was just three hundred years ago...”

“And that was when humans inherited sorcery from the Weird Dragons, right? I remember you mentioned that in Alenhatam.”

“Right. Humans and Weird Dragons — sometimes called Nornir, or to most people, Celestials — looked virtually identical, and the children born between them were the ancestors of modern human Sorcerers. That makes us a peculiar race even on this Continent — we can use sorcery, despite not being dragons.”

Orphen shifted his gaze over to the Deep Dragon sculpture.

“Dragon worshipers see us as a tainted existence. Hell, when it first got out that humans had inherited sorcery from the Weird Dragons, the very same ones that birthed them tried to massacre them all from the face of the Continent. To this day, nobody knows why Dragons hate human Sorcerers so much. And I’m not about to go believing the words of that senile old Celestial puppet we fought in the ruins beneath Alenhatam, because that thing’s story stank of bullshit.”

“...So the problem’s just that you can use sorcery? Doesn’t that mean the Dragons are just trying to keep that power all to themselves, so they can keep humans in check?”

“I dunno about that. It’s arguable whether or not human sorcery is even at the level of the weaker Dragon races. There are some who’ll say with absolute confidence that we’re stronger than a few Dragons as it is, and, well, if we’re talking strictly sorcery then maybe that’s true. Compared to the Atmospheric Sorcery of Mist Dragons, or the Lycanthrope Sorcery of Red Dragons, our Vocal Sorcery — especially White Sorcery — is many times more powerful on its own. But that’s only if you ignore the traits of *the races that wield this sorcery*. Mist Dragons have gigantic bodies that are fully equipped to deal with any and all kinds of extreme atmospheric conditions where humans could never survive, and Red Dragons are highly intelligent beings who are far more well-versed in the lay of the land than any human you’ll ever meet. It’s safe to assume that no Dragon on the Continent sees human Sorcerers as any real threat. Envy, on the other hand... is a theory I could see being way more plausible.”

“Envy?” asked Claiomh, apparently doubtful.

A cynical smirk crossed Orphen’s lips. “At the end of the day, humans are the one race on the Continent prospering the most right now. But we shouldn’t ever forget...” Orphen paused, the cynical smile not fading for a second. “...That

this Continent belongs to the Dragons.”

“Hmmm. But, hang on,” said Claiomh, still curious about one last thing: “That doesn’t really answer my question. How come Dragon worshipers hate human Sorcerers so much?”

“Who knows? Your guess is as good as mine,” said Orphen. Claiomh slumped her shoulders, apparently brooding over it, so Orphen decided to follow that up with his own interpretation: “Dragon worshipers worship Dragons — the *true* rulers of the Continent. And a large number of Dragons loathe the existence of human Sorcerers. When your King hates a foreign power, so too will his people, more often than not. So if Dragons hate human Sorcerers, then Dragon worshipers are gonna turn out the same. At least, I’m assuming that’s the logic behind it, anyway.”

“Do people really follow the leader so blindly like that, though?”

“Depends on the kind of person, I guess. Some people are so overflowing with individuality that they convince themselves *they’re* the Kings of the Continent, usually to the point of tyranny which ultimately leads to their own downfall. The way I see it, there are two extremes and then a lot of comfortable middle ground.”

“When you put it like that, it makes sense,” agreed Claiomh.

Yeah, makes a lot more sense to me when I put it like that, too, agreed Orphen.

The summer heat made the night unbearably hot. A wave of humidity rippled through the very air, moving to shake the leaves and branches of every tree. Orphen and Claiomh moved forwards into the darkness.

There wasn’t a single lit area around at all. Everything was consumed by pitch black, from the treeline that skirted the village to the closest barn. The two of them continued their infiltration route into the village. If they kept circling then the chances of being caught increased, so it was better to just invade.

Claiomh’s clothing was dark enough to blend into the absence of light, her dark purple jacket reflecting little as she clutched her sword close to her chest. Orphen moved with her, progressing deeper down the village streets. He didn’t

know exactly where they were keeping Majic captive, but he assumed that the center of the village would be a good place to start.

There were various large dome-roofed buildings with wide chimney stacks in the village center, leading Orphen to assume that these were workshops. Orphen figured that there wouldn't be any reason to keep a captive in a place like that, so he found his eyes fixing on a nearby church. It was equally unlikely that they'd commit torture in a place of worship, which meant...

There are two places Majic could be, thought Orphen. Underground, in the basement... Or up in that tower...

The two of them finally stopped moving, collecting their thoughts in the shade of a small hut.

"This is bad," Orphen muttered to himself. "I'd normally just use Sorcery to open a door like that but it's not gonna cut it this time."

Claiomh responded with a whisper, "Can't you just take a key from a guard or something?"

Orphen shook his head and spoke in a hushed tone, "No good. It'd be easy enough to nab something, but we couldn't do that and stay quiet. If the enemy has some kind of basic training then we aren't gonna be able to subdue them quietly either. Using sorcery would also mean raising my voice... I'm starting to wonder if we shouldn't just set a fire and use the chaos as cover to get inside... But at that point I might as well just use sorcery to get the door open."

Claiomh listened intently, then balled her hand into a fist. "How about we just fight these wacko cultists?! That's what we gotta do, Orphen!"

"Don't be an idiot," sighed Orphen, "A village this size means we'd end up having to fight guerrilla-style, and frankly I don't fancy our chances..."

"Fine, whatever..." muttered Claiomh, "Then just burn the village and get it over with... Won't that take care of it?"

Orphen shook his head again. "Look, this religion or whatever... I don't know enough about what's going on with them to just start recklessly burning stuff. Besides, all we really need is a commotion... Enough to keep them distracted while I get inside and look for Majic."

“...Well,” grinned Claiomh, “If it’s a distraction you need, then we don’t need to use sorcery at all. Just take your clothes off and go running around in the streets. I’m sure a naked maniac roaming around would be enough of a commotion, right?”

Orphen stared at the girl in disbelief. “I don’t know what’s going on in that head of yours... But absolutely not.”

“Oh c’mon,” continued Claiomh, “I’m sure a surprise naked Orphen attack is far from what they’re expecting, right~?”

“...Enough.”

“Yeah, you should wear a nose ring too! Maximum confusion. That’ll even wake up the sleeping villagers, and they’ll all come out and be-“

“...You’re not really understanding the gravity of the situation here, are you? We need to focus on rescuing Majic right now.”

“I’m sure he’s fine! He’s a big boy. At worst he’s probably just hungry, right?”

“I don’t think so, honestly. If he’s not already dead, then they’re probably torturing him.”

“Torture?! No way!”

Orphen sighed quietly and shot Claiomh a serious glance, indicating that he certainly wasn’t kidding. Judging from the vacant expression on her face, it was probably going to be difficult to get her to fully understand the gravity of the whole “Majic is probably going to be killed by these nutty fanatics” situation.

Orphen simply turned around and continued to advance a little further into the village.

Whooooooooosh!

All of a sudden, a burst of air pressure whizzed past the two, catching them off-guard.

What the?! thought Orphen, but he barely had time to parse what had happened before things suddenly went to hell.

In the center of the village, an enormous pillar of white flame had erupted,

spilling upwards towards the very heavens.

“What the hell?!” Orphen cried out in a mixture of shock and awe. Claiomh could only let out a sudden, surprised shriek.

Dust had been kicked up all over the place by the sudden gust of wind, and the nearby buildings were noisily buffeted by sand and debris. The pillar of fire was still there, not a single part of it dying down. It was burning smack bang in the middle of the village, amidst the workshops and their smoldering chimneys. The entire village was illuminated by the presence of the raging, flaming tornado.

That's no gas explosion... thought Orphen to himself. *Sure as hell isn't from oil, either...* There's no smell...

It was a near-perfect pillar of white flames, something like that couldn't be naturally caused by human hands... There was no other explanation...

“...It's sorcery!” yelled Orphen.

The village was finally springing to life, buzzing with activity. People were bursting out of their houses to look at the towering inferno. It proved a big enough distraction that nobody even noticed Orphen or Claiomh. Not yet, at least.

“Sorcery?” Claiomh tilted her head. “Then was that Majic's doing?!”

“Hell no!” screamed Orphen. “If that brat could use sorcery like that then I wouldn't need to teach him a damn thing!”

“Huh, really? Then what is it...?”

“I don't know but... This isn't human sorcery, not in the least!” Orphen shook his head. Competent sorcerers were able to read the composition of the spells left lingering in the air afterwards, and to Orphen it was clear as day. He could ‘see’ this spell, and exactly how capable a sorcerer its caster was.

“Wait, could it be... The dragon statue...?!” he cried.

Claiomh suddenly moved to draw her sword. Orphen quickly stopped her.

“Stop. Think about what you're doing.”

“I’m not a little kid, you know... Give me a break...!” muttered the girl.

Orphen shook his head once more, quietly considering bashing her in the head. She wasn’t the type of girl who could read the atmosphere at all... Brashly drawing a weapon in the middle of a place like this would only invite unwanted attention.

“Look there!” he commented, fingers pointed towards the flaming pillar. It had begun to spin itself out, slowly extinguishing itself. Soon the last remaining embers were gone as well, and only the light of the moon shone down upon the village... Light that gave way to a terrible silhouette. Not far from the village center was a large creature. As it stepped forwards into the moonlight, its visage became all the more clear. The vague, shadowy form that it once was became all the more recognizable.

It was a gigantic wolf.

“It’s... A Deep Dragon...!”

Fearful tremors wracked Orphen’s body as he managed to force out the name of what he was bearing witness to. Until only moments ago, Dragons were mere legends to him... But now there was no mistaking it. He was looking at one in the flesh. His mind seized up, overflowing with horrific stories he had read about these creatures.

“The Fenrir... The Deep Dragons... They’re capable of spatial transfer sorcery... It all makes sense...” muttered Orphen, seemingly dumbfounded.

“Huh? Whaddya mean?” Claiomh, on the other hand, had a glint in her eye as she looked over the creature. She had none of the knowledge necessary to give her the fear she should’ve been feeling.

“Listen to me! That’s a Deep Dragon!” cried Orphen, “It’s one of the strongest species to ever exist!”

The enormous wolf stood still, its black fur melding into the night that surrounded it. If the moon wasn’t out, it would have effectively been invisible. Not even its motions would’ve been detected. Deep Dragons made no sound when they moved, nor did they make outward noise if they didn’t want to. They were capable of understanding language, capable of intelligent thought... But

they were dragons most silent and deadly. Deep Dragons had enormous bodies, and often remained deep underwater... But on land they were truly apex predators.

It was said that there were two types of Dragon species considered the 'worst' for humans to encounter. The worst would typically be considered the Mist Dragons... But what few people realized was that Deep Dragons were far more formidable than that... For the Deep Dragons had a relationship with Sorcery so intense that few could ever even imagine surpassing them.

"Wow, he looks cool!" grinned Claiomh, completely oblivious to the hulking mass of raw danger sitting not too far from them. Orphen simply stared at her in disbelief, quietly resigning himself to the fact that she would never be able to comprehend just how risky the situation was even if he told her. Orphen grabbed Claiomh by the shoulder, stopping her from acting any more like a mischievous child and sneaking towards the beast.

You goddamn idiot... You can't just go toddling towards danger! Thought Orphen as he glared into the girl's blue eyes.

"Run for it, got it?!" he suddenly yelled.

"Huh?!" She stared at him in confusion.

Everyone in the village had come out of their homes and their eyes were completely set on the Deep Dragon's form. Some were already screaming or raising the alarm. They hadn't yet noticed Orphen or Claiomh, so he was attempting to seize the opportunity and let her escape. Orphen kept staring into the girl's eyes, he had already figured out based on past experiences that the best way to deal with her was to refuse her any opportunity to argue back.

"Can you get back where we came from if you retrace our steps through the forest?"

"Well yeah, but..."

"Do it. I need you to get past anyone who might be behind us, get back into the forest and head back towards the nearest ranger station, alright? You need to speak to the relevant authorities and tell them exactly what's going on here. I need you to do this, alright?!"

“I guess I can do that, but...”

“No buts! I’ll handle Majic, okay?! I’ll follow right after you!”

“But-!”

“JUST GO!”

Orphen tightened his grip on Claiomh’s shoulder and then released, pushing her ahead a little. She retreated like a wounded puppy, glaring back at Orphen with a glint of indignation in her eyes.

“Orphen...” she started, keen on getting in a parting threat. “Next time you better listen to what I say, or else!”

“Shut up! You’re being too loud!” Orphen snarled at her. He was mostly furious at how damn persistent the girl was.

I wonder if I’ll even be able to survive this alone...

Orphen grasped the necklace he was wearing and made a silent prayer. He didn’t exactly know who or what he was praying to, though.

Damn it Majic... The shit I do for you...

Orphen ran towards the center of the village.

The Deep Dragon stood there motionless, it hadn’t moved an inch since it had stepped from the darkness when it appeared. Orphen noticed that it almost seemed like it was guarding the tower, peacefully staring upwards at the highest floor.

Ah balls... thought Orphen to himself. If Majic is actually in there, then that thing’s gonna see me before long... I wonder if it’ll kill me.

The village was no longer dark. It had long since been illuminated by torchlight. The villagers were swarming the area, staring up at the great beast with a mixture of awe and shock on their faces. Orphen listened and, though there was wailing and screaming, none of it seemed rooted in fear.

Guess that makes sense... They do think this thing’s their guardian or whatever... Well, that’s what they believe... Doubt it’s true.

Suddenly... Almost silently... Orphen heard a voice from nowhere.

《Is... That... So...?》

“What the...?” Orphen stopped moving, unsure whether or not to believe his own ears. But he was almost certain that he’d just heard a voice speak as though it were right next to him.

The hell...?

He stood in the shade of one of the houses. It couldn’t have been one of the villagers... He looked down the road and saw many of them holding torches. They still hadn’t noticed him. They were all fixated on the Fenrir before them.

No point stopping and thinking, gotta keep moving...

If all the villagers were gathering around the Deep Dragon, Orphen assumed he’d probably have to end up escaping both Fenrir and a gang of devout zealots. That was going to be difficult.

Damn that idiot, making me waste my time and energy like this... Why I oughta...

His thoughts were once again cut off by a sudden voice.

《It is not yet time.》

Orphen stopped in his tracks. *I knew I wasn’t imagining it!*

Yet that voice was no voice at all. There were no vibrations in the atmosphere... It was as though the voice was simply “appearing” in his mind, rather than being carried there.

...Is this... The Deep Dragon’s Sorcery?

The Deep Dragons commanded a sorcery much like the human’s white sorcery, a mastery of the base spirit that ran through everything... But a key difference was that the Fenrir could also command non-living things with their sorcery. Their white sorcery could manipulate the ground, the water, the forests, the very air around people... Space itself.

It was possible that the flaming pillar from earlier was the result of space itself being shifted in the area, or perhaps it was merely a byproduct of the sorcery that the Fenrir had used to teleport itself into the village center.

While humans used their voices to transmit their sorceries, the Deep Dragons needed to only use their gaze... But Orphen wasn't in the creature's line of sight. Despite this, it seemed he was still affected by its psychic influence. This caused him to feel a sense of dread and panic.

Why the hell is a Deep Dragon here of all places? And why isn't it even doing anything?! I don't get it!

If the legends were to be believed, the Deep Dragon guarded Fenrir's Forest and, using a great power that could wipe villages off the map, would dutifully eradicate any humans that encroached upon the land. But this Dragon had simply appeared in the village and remained still... It wasn't doing a thing.

Is it actually the guardian here or something?! That can't be...

Orphen continued to absently ponder to himself, a million questions running through his head as he turned the corner...

"Halt! Who are you?!"

Orphen froze as an unknown voice called out to him. He looked towards the direction of the voice and found himself face to face with a tall man. He held a torch in his right hand, and a prayer stick in his left. The torchlight illuminated his face, showing that he was a well-built, middle-aged and mustached man.

There was a small entourage of villagers behind the man. And it wasn't long before more curious people came to fill out the crowd. Orphen felt that most of them were around the same... But one man stood out. There was a young man behind the mustached gentleman who exuded a threatening aura. He had a grin glued to his face and wore an unmarked ranger jacket. He seemed to be in his early twenties at a glance.

The heavysset man finally raised his voice again. He spoke in a booming, commanding manner.

"You're not one of us. Are you?"

"...Well, I'm..." Orphen opened his mouth to speak, but the large man was having none of it. He dropped his prayer stick to the ground and reached into his pocket, producing a dark object made of iron... Orphen instinctively jumped backwards at the sight of it.

The man quickly pointed it at Orphen, causing it to emit a loud bang.

“A goddamn pistol?!” Orphen cried out in disbelief. The bullet had missed him due to the darkness. Orphan had felt it whiz right by him... Too close for comfort.



“You guys got a Dragon AND firearms?! I’m pretty sure this country has gun control, mister!” Orphen yelled out, prompting the large man to smirk. But his eyes weren’t reflecting anything nearly as jovial.

“Your petty human laws mean nothing in our forest, boy! We are the messengers of our great Dragon God! We are the very hearts and souls of this forest! And I am their venerable leader, MacDougal!”

The man calling himself MacDougal was about to pull the trigger again; Orphen knew he had to act fast. He knew that handguns were rendered far more useless at close range, so he just needed to close the distance. There was a chance he could get injured badly with a short-range blast, but it was a risk he was going to have to be willing to take.

“I Unsheathe Thee...!” yelled Orphen, taking a fighting stance.

“He’s a sorcerer! Get him!” shouted MacDougal in retaliation, prompting a group of men to charge towards Orphen.

“Sword of L-hhgh!”

Orphen’s incantation was cut miserably short by a gruesome pain in his right shoulder. He glanced at the source of the sensation and realized that he had been stabbed just before he could release his spell. He groaned in pain. If his arms hadn’t been raised then it would’ve jabbed him right in the throat.

The knife slipped out of the wound as Orphen raised his gaze and locked eyes with the grinning young man behind MacDougal. The man’s face almost seemed to goad him onwards. Another gunshot rang out, but it missed him once more. Orphen attempted to raise his shoulders and tried to gather his sorcery for one more attempt, but he suddenly felt something strike him from the side. A member of MacDougal’s posse had hit him with a stick, causing him to fall to the ground.

“Hngh!” Orphen moaned out as another man ran up to him and kicked him in the ribs. That man suddenly yelled out in pain as Orphen scrambled to his feet, punching him hard in the stomach. As soon as the man fell, Orphen used his opportunity to cast a spell.

“Flow Thus! Angel Breath!”

Orphen's palm was extended towards the fallen man as a sudden wind kicked up. The prone man was blasted back by a powerful air pressure, crashing hard into MacDougal for a direct hit.

Serves you right, bastard! Orphen thought to himself, recovering his position as best he could. *Alright, now I just gotta rescue Majic and... Ah...?!*

Orphen looked over towards the source of unease that had just been generated within him. The Deep Dragon was there.

"Ohh!" cried MacDougal, speaking out in an almost rapturous stupor.

"M-My Lord!"

My Lord... Orphen quietly repeated the man's words in his mind.

The Deep Dragon stood dead still, but it was staring right at them.

Legends referred to the Fenrir, the Deep Dragon, as the Silent Dragon Warrior. It lived here in the Fenrir's Forest, and stood proudly against any human foolish enough to stand in its way.

If the War Dragons and the Weird Dragons were Kings and Queens respectively, then the Deep Dragons were simply soldiers... But one would have to be a fool to challenge a soldier to a fight. One would have to be even more foolish to expect to win.

The very presence this black wolf emitted was one of sheer terror. It had beautiful green eyes that shimmered in the darkness, looking into them would yield nothing but the sense that it could reduce a mere human to dust by simply staring. Its mouth never opened, so the red tongue hidden within could never be seen... Its very visage was akin to oil spilling out into the night, its ragged fur blending in with the darkness surrounding it.

It was the Deep Dragon, the Fenrir, one of the most beautiful and horrific creatures to ever grace the continent. Beneath the moonlight, it surveyed Orphen with the silent eyes of a hardened warrior.

"Why... Are you looking at me...?!" Orphen stared back at the creature, unsure of its intent. He had no idea why it came to this village, why it refused to take action, and more importantly... Why it simply stared at him.

Perhaps the Dragon really was the guardian of this village, and it had come to take care of him at last.

《This man? To remove him? And then?》

Huh...? What...? Orphen heard words, but didn't quite understand the context. It was as if he was hearing half of a conversation... Orphen briefly wondered in his pained haze if it was talking to someone in the crowd.

《Then you seek to borrow my power for your own ends? Your own idea of protection?》

No...! Gah...! Orphen's entire body convulsed. He attempted to resist the potent sorcery the Deep Dragon was now silently casting upon him, but he was simply outmatched.

Finally, he fell down to the ground... Engulfed in darkness.

Chapter III: Orphen, Captured!

He was all alone, floating in the dark.

He wasn't aware of whether he was sitting or standing, it was as though his body had been robbed of all senses.

He could feel a vague 'something' nipping at his fingertips, or perhaps an unusual sense of warmth cradling his back... And once he recognized those feelings, his fingertips began to tremble as if unbearably cold.

The space in front of him was suddenly engulfed in a vast light and, although he still couldn't perceive his own body, he could clearly recognize the outline of a figure in front of him.

A female form clad in thin silk stood before him, she was immature... Some kind of young girl.

Slowly, but suddenly all the same, she opened her mouth and began to speak.

《You are the one they call Orphen, are you not...?》

Though he wanted to, he found himself unable to speak up in response. Even though he was caught in such a confusing, perilous sensation, a wave of calm continued to wash over his body.

She continued to speak.

《I owe you an apology, Orphen. That is why I speak now to your very soul...》

Her expression became servile, apologetic. Her words came to frustrate Orphen, as he still could not muster up the ability to respond to her.

《You really must forgive me, for... I am the reason you were attacked... I am so very sorry.》

He didn't understand what she was saying, however.

I was attacked? Who was attacked...? Who am I, anyway...? Huh...

He could not even recall his own assault, nor could he recall his own name. Strangely, he wasn't even overcome with the desire to remember any of those details. Nothing the girl said would help explain these sensations, either.

《You sought to rescue Majic, and so the Dragon attacked you... It is my fault, for it serves me in lieu of human contact.》

Orphen had no response, and few thoughts.

《I did not wish for Majic to leave this place. Or perhaps my feelings were that of jealousy... After all, help had come for him, and that hurt my feelings.》

Her voice was coming through clear as day, but Orphen had no idea what her words actually meant.

《I'm sorry... Truly, I am. I wanted to be rid of you, but I did not think the Dragon would nullify you entirely.》

Dragon... The word generated just a smidge of fear inside Orphen's largely-useless form. It was a feeling deeply engraved into his being, what little being there was of him left... A feeling that made him desperate to flee.

《I will heal the damage as best as I can, I promise you that... But I believe it will take me some time...》

As she spoke, the darkness around him continued to thin in comparison to the encroaching light.

《And please, do not fight against MacDougal. Please do not kill him. For he is this village's...》

But, before he could hear what she intended to say, the darkness faded away completely and gave way to pure light.



What...? Orphen's mind began to race as he stirred, his mind clogging itself with all manner of questions, over and over again.

Where am I? Who am I...? How am I breathing...? Am I in pain? What is... pain...? Damn it all...

He cursed quietly and lay backwards, his upper body hitting itself against a surface. It was a simple motion, but one that was enough to course a subtle motion through his entire body. He realized in that moment that his left shoulder was burning. He'd clearly been wounded.

I can't... seem to remember...

But part of him certainly remembered something, at least. He remembered a girl who appeared out of the dark, he remembered being afraid of something, and her calm and gentle demeanor.

He finally opened his eyes. Wherever he was, it was dark, but there was a dim source of light coming from behind him. He was laying sideways, his body facing a wall, one made of rock and earth. It was clear that the ground he lay on was also of the same construction. Briefly he wondered if he'd been buried alive, or relegated to some kind of cave. But then...

"So you're awake, sorcerer."

A voice suddenly called out to him. His memories were hazy, but the voice elicited a response inside him. The voice must have belonged to MacDougal, the leader of the village.

Orphen slowly rolled his body over so he could face the direction the voice came from. Immediately a pair of boots entered his line of sight, MacDougal was standing above him and looking down. The boots were filthy, the kind a hiker would wear for a long trek. Orphen weakly moved his head, and noticed another pair of shoes not far away. MacDougal clearly wasn't alone.

Beyond the shoes, Orphen could identify a set of iron bars, and a crudely constructed staircase. Orphen managed to use his powers of deduction to figure out the rest. He was clearly trapped in an underground dungeon. The door to his cell was slightly ajar, and he was currently with MacDougal and another man. He glanced upwards to catch the other man's face, and saw the face of the man who had stabbed him. The wound in Orphen's left shoulder had since closed, thankfully. The clothes he wore were sticky with dried blood, and he noticed that his wound had been dressed. Perhaps he might have died of blood loss had the treatment not been applied.

Can I stand...? Orphen thought weakly to himself. He concluded that he probably could, but it would be wise to hide any kind of physical strength for the time being.

MacDougal stared down at Orphen with cold, cruel eyes. His mouth opened.

“Tell us your name, boy.”

“...Nh...”

Orphen didn't answer. Or rather, he found himself unable to answer.

What is my name? He quietly wondered to himself, as his groggy head was unable to recover the relevant information. He was still half-caught in that dream he'd had earlier.

MacDougal, clearly not a fan of Orphen's lack of response, let out a heavy sigh.

“He's not saying a thing,” grumbled the man.

“I'm hardly surprised that he's giving us the cold shoulder,” laughed the other man. He was holding a sword. He was the man from last night, the one that wore the ranger jacket. Orphen recalled his face vividly.

“And why's that, Salua?” replied MacDougal. It seemed that this cohort was named Salua. The man gave a gentle shrug and answered with a bit of a smirk on his face.

“Because this man wears the crest of the Tower of Fangs. He's among the elite of the sorcerers, understand? I'm certain that whatever his reasons are for coming here, he plans on keeping us in the dark about it.”

The response caused MacDougal to emit a bitter laugh.

Tower of Fangs... The words resonated within Orphen's mind, striking chords to fill in blank memories. He'd spent the vast majority of his life there, after all. But MacDougal was unfazed by this new information, and he continued to speak.

“I'm sure if we pressure him physically, he'll learn to spill his secrets.”

Salua shook his head, “Torture? On a trained sorcerer? I suppose you aren't aware of the fact that they're specifically trained to resist that kind of thing.”

MacDougal looked over at him with a slightly furrowed brow. “Have you forgotten who the boss is here, Salua?”

“Of course not,” grinned the younger man. “You're the center of this village,

its heart itself.”

MacDougal seemed satisfied with Salua’s answer, and he turned to Orphen once more.

“And I want to know more than your name. What of the villagers you must’ve encountered earlier. Did you kill them, sorcerer?”

Kill? The word itself seemed so utterly absurd to Orphen that he couldn’t help but let out a small grimace of a smile. MacDougal, unfortunately, did not seem amused at all by the sudden gesture.

“What’s so funny, hm?!” roared the man, as he brought his boot crashing down into Orphen’s face. Orphen quickly thought of the best way to kill the man. He could use his teeth to tear the tendon in his ankle. Then it would be a simple matter of jumping to his feet and crushing MacDougal’s skull like a watermelon with his feet. If Orphen truly wanted to, he was sure he could find a way to wipe both men in the room from the face of the earth. If he operated exactly as he’d been taught growing up, this is the course of action that Orphen would’ve taken. But he remained steadfast.

He simply glared up at MacDougal with hatred-filled eyes. MacDougal took the silent gesture as obedient submission. He began to speak up again with a smug look on his mustached face.

“Listen here, boy. I am MacDougal. You are intruding upon hallowed ground. This is the Grand Heartland. This is a sacred place, a safe haven to those who pursue the truth of this world. We serve a Dragon, a great and powerful wielder of true Sorcery. A far cry from the pale imitation Sorcery that you so-called Sorcerers practice!”

Orphen maintained his silence, prompting Salua to give another little shrug. MacDougal continued to talk.

“Now that we’ve captured you, I don’t quite know what to do with you. But it is imperative that you inform me why a Sorcerer from the Tower of Fangs has come all the way out of here. Need I remind you that we’ve captured your apprentice? If either of you escape here, I promise you that I will personally kill whichever one remains.”

Apprentice...? Orphen attempted to internalize the term. Do I have one of those...? Did I always have one...? Ah... Perhaps... I do have a student...?

“Either way,” continued the large man. “Rest down here and recover your strength for now... But don’t try anything foolish. I will not hesitate to yank a tooth from that handsome face of yours. Understand?”

MacDougal grinned at his own parting remark before turning on his heel and leaving the cell. Salua followed shortly afterwards. Orphen couldn’t say a word in response to the jeering.

The cell door was locked up tight.

Orphen used some of his Sorcery to patch up the closed wound on his shoulder, before falling back to sleep. After an hour of rest, he successfully regained all of his memories.



“What’s with this...?”

The question caused the girl some brief embarrassment, and she scowled gently as she looked out the window. She put the feeling aside for a moment, though some small shame lingered inside her.

She’s not acting as a Shrine Maiden right now... Thought Majic to himself.

She turned to him, wearing a fairly ordinary set of pants and a long-sleeved shirt. They looked as though they were made out of delicate white linen.

“I’m sorry... I don’t ordinarily let people see me when I’m wearing these rags...” she muttered.

“Rags...?” inquired Majic, causing Fiena to let out a little laugh.

“I’m a tool, you know? For bringing the people of this village together, therefore I must always look my best. It’s important that I look the part for when I fulfill my duties. Now and then, I can make small miracles occur, after all.”

“Miracles?” Majic tilted his head. “... Is that how you healed my injury?”

Fiena didn’t offer him a response, she simply glanced around the room as if

attempting to find something.

Majic glanced around as well. He was in the highest room in the tallest tower right in the center of the town, which meant the room wasn't all that spacious. It was only a few steps across at best. It was outfitted with a simple bed, a workdesk, a small circular table, and a set of wooden chairs.

He lay on the bed, and was clearly wearing girl's pajamas. Beneath it, his body was bound tight with bandages. The wounds that MacDougal had left on his body were painless, but clearly still present. According to Fiena, it would be fine for Majic to get up and even start walking around, but he was reluctant to give it a go. He didn't want to strain himself any more than necessary.

Fiena seemed to have found what she was looking for. It was a jug of water on the nearby table. She poured out a bit of it into a cup and brought it up to her lips before pausing to speak.

"Are your wounds still sore?"

"Ah, no... They're actually totally painless... But when I try to move, my muscles feel a little cramped and tense," Majic quietly grumbled, attempting to flex his body.

"That's because the skin tissue hasn't fully connected itself back yet, I think... The Sorcery that was used on you was immensely potent, but I'm hardly a doctor..."

"Powerful sorcery, huh...?" chuckled Majic, "I wonder if my master could do something like that..."

Majic was still a student, so there was no way he could hope to heal a grievous wound or anything just yet. His body trembled slightly, so he decided to stop straining so much.

"What am I wearing these clothes for, anyway?" He frowned, looking at the oversized, silky pyjamas on top of his body. Fiena drew her drinking cup away from her mouth and softly laughed.

"Because that's all I had to put you in, silly. How else was I meant to look after you in my room?"

“Ah... I mean... I guess you have a point...” Majic trailed off as he thought to himself.

I wonder what Master would say if he saw me like this... Worse still, I wonder what Claiomh would say... Oh geez...

He turned white at the prospect, he didn't even want to imagine such a scenario.



“Whose clothes are these, anyway?” asked Majic.

“Ah, they belong to Auntie Laas, she does all the cooking here,” smiled Fiena.

“...Is that right...” muttered Majic, clearly disappointed about something.

The sudden sound of footsteps outside the door gave way to MacDougal, who entered the room with a scowl on his face. None of his men were with him, he was simply there alone. Fiena seemed to lose a little bit of the spark in her eyes when she saw him.

Just as suddenly as he had appeared, MacDougal opened his mouth and spoke up in an authoritative manner. “Are you not preparing, Fiena?”

“Whatever... Do you mean...?” she replied, voice stilted.

Fiena’s demeanor had completely changed to that of the shrine maiden Majic had met earlier. But it felt as though this was her default defensive stance.

MacDougal narrowed his eyes and barked out another statement. “What we discussed earlier. The promised time draws nearer, understand?”

“...Y-Yes, I do...” nodded Fiena.

MacDougal heaved a great sigh before growling out once more. “You said the same thing yesterday, and the same thing the day before that, and before that again.”

“It’s just...”

Majic could barely hear her, as her voice had shrunk down to a whisper. MacDougal, on the other hand, had heard the girl loud and clear.

“What did you say, girl?” growled the man.

“I said...” she repeated herself, but once again Majic couldn’t make out a single part of what she had said. Majic simply sat there, quiet and fearful, as her shrine maiden façade began to crumble under pressure.

MacDougal took an angered step forwards. “Who protected you when you became lost in this forest half a year ago?”

“I... I didn’t get lost,” snapped Fiena, looking down at her feet before backing away slightly. MacDougal quirked a brow at her sudden, unexpected statement.

“Oh? Then what was it you were doing, hm?” he softly jeered.

“I was searching...” she replied.

“Searching? For what?”

“For... You...” Fiena’s voice was beginning to tremble.

MacDougal expressed legitimate surprise upon hearing that. He piped up once more.

“If that’s the case, then continue following under my guidance.”

Fiena remained silent. MacDougal took another step forwards.

“You are vital to our plans, understand? Without you, this could never have been possible. You have our gratitude for that, I promise...”

He shrugged his shoulders a bit.

“So please respond properly to our gratitude, Fiena. You have that power in you, so use it to aid me.”

“But... That power...” Fiena mumbled quietly.

MacDougal continued talking, caring not for her hesitation.

“Yes, that power in you, Fiena. The power of a Dragon’s Sorcery.”

What...? Majic was confused by this remark; it was all a bit too much for him to wrap his head around. MacDougal continued on even further in the meantime.

“With that power we can find the ‘heart’ of this ‘forest’, it’s something only you’re capable of doing, Fiena.”

“I... It’s just...” Fiena mumbled something, once more out of Majic’s earshot.

MacDougal took yet another step forward and fiercely grabbed at Fiena’s wrist. He spoke up with a scowl on his face. “Don’t you start speaking of things you don’t understand, girl! I spared this wretched little Sorcerer, didn’t I?! Is that not enough for you?” MacDougal wildly gestured towards Majic, who remained frozen in place.

The man kept on speaking, “If it’s fresh air you want, then open up a damn

window and suck in all you like! If you want the ground beneath your feet, is it not good enough that I allow you to walk in the forest once every three days?! I do all of this for you, but you don't repay this kindness at all! You pathetic, abandoned little-"

"That's enough," said Majic, as he inhaled sharply.

"Ghah!"

He carried with his voice an undertone of Sorcery, and used it to release his spell. MacDougal's body was picked up like a ragdoll and cast to the other side of the room. Fiena stared on in awe as the older man crashed into the wooden table as Majic got up from the bed.

His wound wasn't fully healed, so he moved slowly, but he stood between Fiena and MacDougal.

"You little bastard!" MacDougal cursed, scowling in fury. Majic wasn't used to this kind of confrontation, but he certainly couldn't back down now.

"Majic?!" the girl behind him cried, but the boy remained steadfast as he talked to MacDougal.

"I'd be careful with that gun of yours. I'm sure I could get an incantation off faster than you could draw and aim it at me."

MacDougal grinned as he held his left hand to his pocket.

"Oh, so you know how to use more Sorcery, then...? How?"

"I was taught by my master," replied Majic. "And he also taught me about that firearm you have. I know that they're illegal to manufacture and own. Why do you have that thing?"

"I..." muttered MacDougal as he rose to his feet. "I claim what I wish to claim! Just as it is my destiny for the Goddess to acknowledge me!"

Goddess? Majic was confused.

"Do you mean the Three Weird Sisters of the Kimluck Church?"

"Not quite, Sorcerer... My Goddess grants me strength! It's nothing you need to worry about!" MacDougal gestured towards his gun once more.

“In the heart of this forest I will attain something far more than your petty Sorcery...!”

“Gh...” Majic groaned as MacDougal began to creep his fingers towards his gun.

If he seriously draws that, thought Majic, mind racing in fear... Then I'll have to kill him before he manages to kill me.

In Majic's mind, the act of killing someone had simply never come up. Not even in his dreams could he have imagined taking a life. He never thought it would be something he'd have to do.

What would Master do in a situation like this...?!

MacDougal, however, continued to speak with a righteous fury burning in his eyes.

“This weapon is a necessity! Just as my entourage is necessary, and just as Fiena is necessary!”

“She isn't a tool for you to keep and use!”

Majic yelled out in fury as his right hand pointed skyward. At the exact same moment, MacDougal unholstered his gun.

“I release thee...!”

As he spoke, Majic's own Sorcery began to fumble, there wasn't enough power accumulated within him to complete the incantation.

Oh no!

The muzzle of MacDougal's gun pointed straight towards Majic's forehead. The boy froze in utter terror, able to feel the sheer weight of death pointed towards him.

I-I'm not ready...! The boy began to panic internally. *Someone, please save me!*

Contrary to Majic's expectations, MacDougal's hand remained still. The trigger was not pulled. Instead, the man seemed almost locked in place. His eyes swiveled to glare just behind Majic.

“Fiena... is this... your doing...?!” he gnashed.

“It is,” replied the young girl.

MacDougal continued to snarl in anger, “Release your hold on me... I can’t move my body...”

The girl simply replied, “I will free you if you promise not to harm Majic. Okay?”

Is she mentally dominating him...? Wondered Majic, who was looking over at her in shock. If he recalled correctly, Orphen had told him that something like that was only possible through White Sorcery. But he hadn’t heard her utter any kind of incantation, so he had no idea if or how she was using a spell. Only one thing was for sure, though.

This can’t be human Sorcery...

After a short time, MacDougal’s hands fell to his sides. After taking a deep breath, he slowly holstered his pistol again.

“It’s happening the day after tomorrow, like it or not,” spat the man. “Be ready.”

The words caused Fiena to let out a startled gasp. Majic didn’t understand what they were talking about, but her response caused a cold chill to run up his spine.

“Please...” Fiena raised her voice to MacDougal, but the large man simply ignored her and left the room without another word. The entire room was silent, save for the slam of an abruptly-closed door.

Majic leaned back against the bed, exhaustion finally getting the better of him as his knees began to buckle. Sweat began to bead and drip from his brow. After a few sharp breaths, he raised his head and spoke to Fiena.

“What is being planned, exactly?”

He was met with silence. Slowly he stood up, quietly cursing the fact that she wasn’t going to tell him a thing.

“Where are my clothes? The ones I came here in, I mean...”

“Wh...?! Do you plan on leaving?!” Fiena gasped out, eyes darting around as anxiety welled up in her.

“Absolutely not.”

Majic had no idea why he said that, but the words simply came to him on the spot.

“I can’t leave yet. That MacDougal guy is seriously dangerous. That’s why I’ve decided my course of action.”

“Your what?” Fiena tilted her head slightly at Majic’s unusual behavior.

“I’ve decided that I can’t run from this place, Fiena. That man is a bully and a tyrant, he’s clearly treating you poorly as well. I can’t just leave you behind.”

“But...”

“No buts. If I’m going to leave, then I’m going to leave with you. We’ll go through the ‘forest’ together with my Master. He’s probably looking for me right now, you know. So don’t worry about a thing. If MacDougal went up against my master then he’d be turned into mincemeat.”

“Uhm...” Fiena began to mutter.

“Hm?” Majic raised a brow. “Ah, sorry. I guess I kinda went on a little, but my master is really-“

“No, not that, it’s just...”

“Hm?”

Fiena looked down at her feet and spoke in a quiet, apologetic tone.

“Your master has already been captured...”



“What the heck?!”

“Guh...” muttered Orphen, “Don’t yell... My head’s killing me...”

Orphen groaned in pain as he lay down on the dungeon floor. He felt like bees were buzzing around between his ears, and felt almost completely devoid of all energy. It was like he’d been on a weeklong drinking bender, and was now

reaping the hangover. The wound on his shoulder still hadn't fully healed, it had clearly cut deep. Even moving slightly caused him immense discomfort.

After recovering his memories, only pain coursed through him. The memory of being beaten, being stabbed, being roughly manhandled and thrown into the jail cell... It all coursed through him, causing fresh signals of pain to flare through his mind.

Majic and Fiena stood outside the jail cell looking down at Orphen. He briefly explained to Orphen that the girl was a Shrine Maiden of the village. Orphen could only look up at her, hazy and confused, because she looked the spitting image of the girl that had come to him in his dream.

"...Why was he treated like this? Is he okay?" Majic frowned as he leaned against the iron bars, surveying the wounded Orphen that lay on the ground before him. Orphen himself looked up at Majic, and was concerned to see bloodstains and bleached droplets on his clothing.

"It's a miracle you even survived... I heard that the Deep Dragon mentally attacked you?"

Orphen noticed a subtle twinge in the girl's demeanor when Majic said the word 'Dragon'. She trembled, just for a brief moment.

Majic continued, "But geez... I can't believe it... I'm just so glad you're alright, master... I mean seriously... Who would've expected this...?"

"Shut it," snapped Orphen. "You're being too noisy... What are you doing here, anyway? Are you here to rescue me or what? Get it over with..."

"Ah, c'mon... You don't have to be like that..." Majic pouted a little bit. "Please listen, though... I came to see you because something big is going down in a little bit over a day..."

"Uhm..." muttered Fiena, gently tugging at Majic's sleeve. He glanced at her for a small second before turning back to Orphen. "Y-Yeah, Fiena here is gonna help us and stuff..."

Damn brat... Thought Orphen to himself. All it takes is a couple eyelash flutters to get you falling over yourself, huh?

Orphen was getting a little bit annoyed at Majic's disjointed ramblings, but Majic continued regardless.

"Oh right, master! Check it out, I'm completely unharmed!"

"Uhm..." muttered Fiena again.

"Ah, well... I mean, I was injured a little, but I'm much better now!"

"Bastard... Stop standing up there gloating about how well you are and get to the point already..." Orphen narrowed his eyes and continued to grumble.

"But Master... What exactly is the extent of a mental attack? How did it leave you in this state?"

"It's simple enough... My mind was targeted, and it broke me down. I almost died... An ordinary Sorcerer would've lost their mind and found their body coming apart at the seams..."

"What? Why would that happen? It's a mental attack, isn't it?" Majic frowned, seemingly puzzled by the situation.

"Do you know what the mind is, Majic?"

Majic tilted his head at Orphen's question. "What do you mean? It's like the brain, right?"

Orphen sighed and shook his head. "Sorcerers have two meanings they ascribe when they talk about the 'mind'. One is the brain, yes. The series of thought processes and nerves that run through your body... But the other? I suppose it could be called the sum of your non-physical existence."

"Uh...Huh..." Majic nodded, completely failing to understand what Orphen meant.

Orphen sighed and pulled himself up. "White Sorcery is the manipulation of the mind, the non-physical aspects of living organisms and even nature itself," he explained. "Black sorcery is the manipulation of the physical, stuff with substance. The Deep Dragon is dangerous because it can force your mind to bend against your will at the fundamental level. You can't beat something like that with Black Sorcery, either."

"Is the Deep Dragon really that scary...?"

“...Look at me, Majic. My current state is the result of the mental breakdown I almost suffered at its hands,” Orphen groaned, clutching his aching head as he turned towards Fiena.

“Fiena, right? Something I need to ask of you...”

“Y-Yes?” stammered the girl. She averted her eyes from the wounded Orphen’s body. Orphen knew that she had a way to directly communicate with the core of his being, he’d seen it happen, but he also knew that was not a skill any human should know.

“This tower is in the middle of the village, but I want to know what’s inside the large building right next to it.”

“Uhm...” The girl went quiet. He didn’t know if she was forbidden from mentioning it or if she just didn’t want to, so he decided to ask something else instead.

“Yesterday, that Deep Dragon that appeared in the village... Tell me about it. Why did it appear?”

“H-Huh?” She didn’t reply properly once more, causing Orphen to sigh and narrow his eyes.

“The Deep Dragon is said to be the guardian of this forest, right? It’s said to attack anything and anyone that it comes across in the forest, right? So then why, pray tell, out of all of the people in that village... Why... Did it only attack me? Don’t tell me it seriously is the guardian god of the village, I just don’t buy it.”

He was met with silence once more.

“If you don’t want to answer, that’s fine. But tell me this, what’s with that MacDougal guy? Why were we captured? Does he just round up anyone who comes into the forest and throw them away like that?”

“That’s... Because you’re Sorcerers... MacDougal hates Sorcerers. Two little dwarfs came into the village recently and said they were being pursued by Sorcerers... That’s why MacDougal was on high alert for your presence.”

Orphen stared blankly and began grinding his teeth. “Those little shits... You

gotta be kidding me..." he quietly grumbled to himself, it seemed like Fiena wouldn't be able to give him the information he sought. Plus, all the talking was giving him a headache.

Just gotta wait till I can move a bit better... Then I can get outta this dump...

Still, he wondered exactly what was going on in this forest. What was with this strange village and its weird cult. Why was the Deep Dragon here, and what did it have to do with the people?

Majic began talking about MacDougal and his pistol, as well as the mysterious power that Fiena seemed to display. Orphen mostly thought about how he wanted to kick the shit out of Volkan. After a while, he turned to the girl and spoke up again.

"Fiena."

"...Y-Yes?" she mumbled.

"Thank you for healing me. You saved my life."

"Ah..."

"Wait, master... She healed you?" Majic looked between the two, a puzzled expression on his face.

Orphen didn't really want to explain the fine details so he just gave a basic rundown.

"I can't fully put it into words but I was basically torn apart mentally... And Fiena here put me back together. Isn't that right?"

"I..." The girl looked as though she was about to nod her head.

"You healed me, didn't you?"

He was met once again by silence. The girl gently brought her hands to her front and started fiddling with her own fingers. Her gaze was once again averted.

"Please, look me in the eyes. You don't have to answer my questions, but look at me."

"Master, this isn't an interrogation..." Majic spoke up, but found himself cut

off by Fiena.

“I... I can answer you...” She turned her gaze to meet Orphen’s. “What do you wish to ask...?”

“Answer me this, then... If you hold a power that mighty inside you... Why do you have so much fear in your eyes?”

Despite the fact that she’d resolved to answer whatever he might say, Fiena found herself at a loss for words. Orphen couldn’t read a thing from the blank expression that the shrine maiden met his question with.

Chapter IV: Fiena's Request

Night had fallen, and darkness had set in. The stairs in the tower were certainly a bit difficult to climb, but they were quite sturdy. The construction quality of the town's buildings was actually very high quality, despite the fact that it was a secluded, frontier settlement. When this village was being built, there was only one man qualified enough to construct it. It was an architect MacDougal had brought with him from the city. It was this man alone who had the village built up into what it was now. He designed the tower, and also the workshop next to it.

Still, the stairs in the tower were incredibly steep; it made the man walking up them wonder if the spiral staircase design had been specifically built to be this steep for any particular reason, but he decided not to dwell on it.

Man, this place sure is different from back home...

Salua grumbled for a moment as his shin hit the edge of one of the steps, his stubbly beard twisting slightly along with the rest of his face. The sword at his waist clattered a bit.

Still... At least fun things happen when you ain't at home...

He continued to climb up the tower, towards the only room in the place. Villagers were prohibited from entering that room. It belonged to the Shrine Maiden. MacDougal himself carried the key to it, and it never unlocked from the outside unless he had business with Fiena. But this time, it was Salua who knocked at the door.

"It's Salua."

After he spoke, the door opened up. Fiena appeared in the entryway, wearing her sleeping gown.

She quietly muttered, "What do you need at this time of night...?"

"Sorry for the intrusion, but I'm not here to chitchat..." spoke Salua. "Need you for something, and also that..."

He paused before looking around the room, and his eyes narrowed.

“Where’s that brat?”

“He’s in the underground dungeon with his master... MacDougal doesn’t trust Sorcerers, after all...”

“Mm... I see... That sounds like MacDougal alright... So he’s in the dungeon, huh...”

Salua quickly turned to leave, but was stopped by Fiena’s sudden raised voice.

“Uhm...”

“Hm?”

Salua turned back around to see the girl trembling softly.

“I... I wasn’t asleep you know. I can’t sleep...”

“Because of the plan?”

Fiena opened her eyes wider in surprise as Salua nonchalantly spoke.

“Why... Why do you know about that...? Did MacDougal...”

“No, he didn’t tell me. I looked into it without permission. It’s happening the day after tomorrow. You and MacDougal will go out there, and the women, children, and non-combatants will stay in the village.”

“Then... Who are you...?” Fiena quietly muttered, but her words trailed off. She didn’t understand why Salua would go behind MacDougal’s back.

Salua, having no obligation to reply to her at all, merely grinned back.

“You know his plan’s gonna succeed, right? He’s developed a pretty good one, all things considered.”

“...Yes, I know.”

“The whole village is gonna go up, you know? Everyone’s gonna die... Ain’t that a bit sad? Sounds pretty sad to me.”

“Yes, I know...” Fiena nodded after a small pause. Salua couldn’t see too well in the dark, but he thought he saw the girl turn pale.

“You just say yes to most things, don’t you?” he jabbed. “You know, I’ve always enjoyed our talks... Ever since you first came here. I don’t want to die,

frankly. I'm gonna bail before he sets his stuff into motion. Do you want to come with me?"

"...I-I don't want to die... But I'm scared..." sniffled the girl.

Salua's tone had been a little aggressive, which seemed to only amplify the fear that Fiena was feeling inside her. She shivered and trembled as a few drops of tears fell from her eyes.

Salua let out a sigh, then pinched the bridge of his nose. "Look. I ain't the most charming of guys... But I will try to protect you, okay? But happiness comes at a cost in life. It isn't just makeup or cheap trinkets. So I'll look after you, or try my best to... But you have to promise me you won't cry, alright?"

He let out another sigh. Salua wasn't a man who enjoyed speaking too much.

Geez... I really don't like this backwater place sometimes... Some goddamn mission I've been sent on...

He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders again before turning around.

"I'm off. Till then, promise me you won't cry."

He started heading back down the steep staircase. But as he walked down, he heard a voice.

《Not yet...?》

He suddenly turned back around and glanced towards Fiena. She wasn't crying anymore, and looked much as she did when she was working as the Shrine Maiden.

"Yes..." she muttered.

Huh...? thought Salua. He was alone in the dark, but could've sworn he heard a voice come from the direction of Fiena's room.

Did I imagine it...?

He paid it no more heed as he headed down the stairs. Eventually, he made it to the entrance of the underground dungeon.

"Eeeeeeeeeek!"

When he heard the screaming, he stopped in his tracks. He briefly wondered

if the torture of the Sorcerer had begun, but a scream like that didn't really match up with what he knew people sounded like while being tortured. It wasn't like in stories or dramatizations. When a real person was tortured, their voices would often become hoarse or weak.

"GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!"

He heard another shriek, finding himself confused again. He moved forward and discovered that the usual guard was not posted at the doorway. He was probably being briefed on the upcoming plan by MacDougal. Salua grinned, he'd been waiting for this kind of opportunity.

"Now then..."

He gripped the handle of his sword, just in case. Though the man in there was gravely injured, he was still a Sorcerer. Salua knew not to underestimate the power of someone versed in the arts of the Tower of Fangs.

He began to descend the stairs. Many of the support structured in the basement of the tower had been reinforced chemically, resulting in a bit of an acrid smell. Salua held his breath as best he could as he descended, and gradually came to the end of the short staircase.

Once he reached the area where the cells were, his mouth gaped open in surprise.

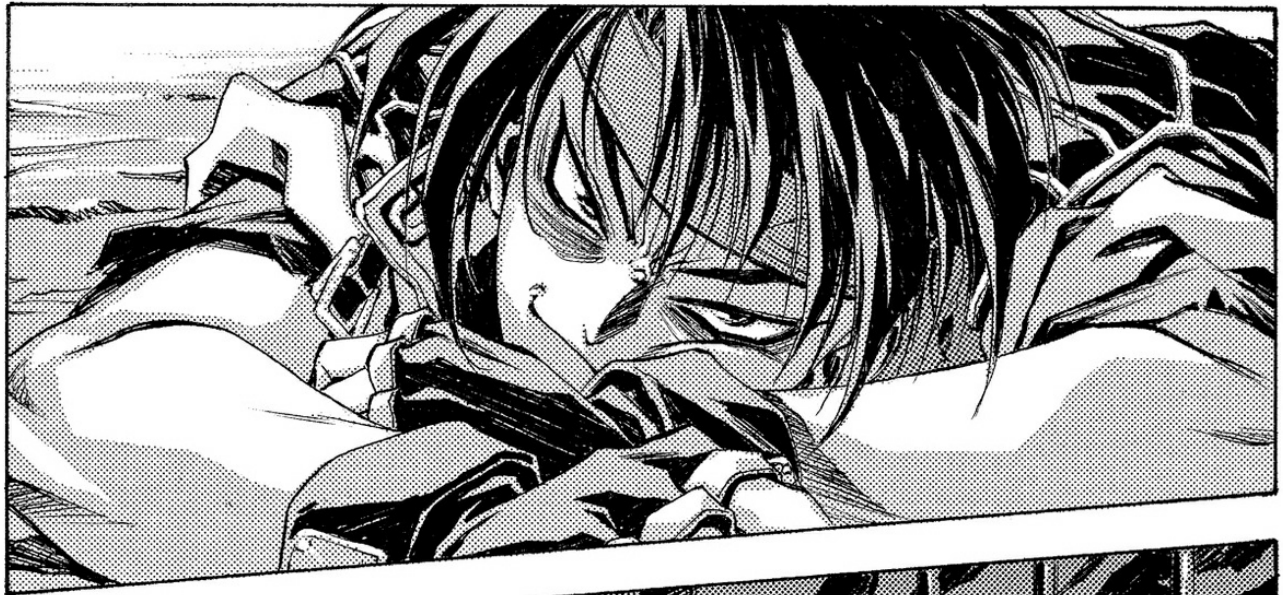
"UWAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Another scream rang out as Salua looked on at the picture of absolute insanity before him. A tiny man was jumping around the room like an idiot as iron rods flew at him, piercing the mud wall behind him. Another iron bar soared through the air and just barely missed the dwarf's head. The iron bars were clearly the bars that had made up the prison, but were now either airborne or embedded in the walls.

"Watch my ear, you jackass!" screamed Volkan, the hyperactive dwarf. There was another dwarf on the ground, Dörtin, but he had clearly passed out from sheer panic and fear.

The one responsible for tormenting these two was the Black Sorcerer, who lay slumped on the ground. The menacing grin on his face was still fixed on Volkan,

however.



“Heh... Seems my aim’s getting better...” snickered the man.

“Wh-Whaddya mean getting better?! You better not be trying to hit me for real, you asshole!” spat the dwarf.

Just what the hell am I looking at? thought Salua to himself. He was completely lost. He had no idea why the two dwarfs who had given them the information about Orphen in the first place were now down here. Did they perhaps know each other?

The fallen Sorcerer gave a bitter laugh. “You’re such an idiot, Volkan... Of course I’m serious...” He spoke completely seriously, with little change in his tone.

“Of course I’m planning to hit you, you bastard...!”

“Uwaaah!”

“Return.” The word was an invocation, and the iron bar that had most recently been embedded in the wall dislodged itself and began floating up in the air again. It sailed backwards and hovered above Orphen. He’d clearly been using Sorcery to control them, but his aim was hindered due to his prone position.

“Uhm... Master?” A sudden voice called out.

Salua hadn’t noticed due to the ruckus with the dwarfs, but Majic was sitting in the corner of the prison cell. He kind of had a stiff smile painted on his face.

“Don’t you think you’re wasting your energy a little? You need to recuperate faster...”

“Y-Yeah! Listen to the kid, you dumb fart! Down boy! Rest, Sorcerer! Go to sleep!” chirped Volkan, as blisteringly irritating as ever.

“Majic...” Orphen sighed and the atmosphere around him seemed to calm. The prison cell quieted down as the Sorcerer’s eyes closed. He began to breathe a little more deeply. “I just wanna hit him once, you know?”

“Mh...” Majic muttered, before finally speaking up again. “Then hit him once, and then we can stop... Alright?”

“Wh-Wh-Whaaaaat?!” shrieked Volkan, tears now streaming down his face. “You can’t be serious! Don’t actually hit me!! Please don’t hit meeeee!”

Orphen seemed to revel in watching Volkan cry for a while, but eventually he spoke up. “Maybe if you keep crying it’ll increase your projectile immunity.” He sneered.

“Is that how it works, master?” pondered Majic.

“Don’t you bastards have any ounce of sympathy for me?!” Volkan had stopped crying, and now mostly just seemed mad.

Orphen raised his voice in kind, glaring over at Volkan and his unconscious brother. “Me?! Sympathy for you?! You slippery goddamn slimeballs have been gallivanting around at your own discretion while I’ve been rotting in this dungeon, and you wanna talk to me about sympathy?!”

“You moneylending bastard! You don’t care about me at all! You’ll just keep trying to hurt me and treat me like a cockroach! It isn’t fair, I tell you! No fair! I have half a mind to give you a manicure so intense that your hair’ll turn white and fall out!”

“I only treat you like a cockroach because you are a cockroach, you little shit!”

“One day you’ll open up a jack-in-the-box but it’ll be me inside, loan shark! And I’ll stab you in the eye!”

Salua continued to watch this... frankly absurd exchange with a mixture of confusion and exasperation on his face. Regardless, he decided it was probably about time to show himself.

“Excuse me...” he spoke.

The moment he opened his mouth, Volkan turned his head in his direction and tears began to spill from his eyes like a waterfall.

“Save me! Save my brother! This terrible Sorcerer has been tormenting my family for years! He killed my sister! He burned my crops! He tricked me! Kill him before he kills you, quick!”

The Black Sorcerer interjected, “He’s right. I’m a farm-raiding sister-killer. Better do what he says.”

“He kills for sport!” screamed Volkan.

Salua looked over the situation and let out a long sigh. He didn’t have time for this... Whatever it was. He shot a glance towards Majic, who was still sitting in the corner of the room. Salua knew that even though the guy was just a kid, he couldn’t underestimate anyone that was capable of using Sorcery. He’d probably used Sorcery to come down here in the first place.

...What a convenient power that must be...

Salua passed through the open door of the prison cell that contained the two men.

“I am Salua, and I know that boy is named Majic...” He glanced down at the prone Sorcerer. “So, tell me, who are you?” When he’d come earlier with MacDougal, he hadn’t really had much of a chance to learn anything, and he didn’t feel like this guy was the kind to talk anyway.

The Black Sorcerer looked up and almost spat his words out. “The name’s Orphen.”

Salua tilted his head in acknowledgment as he squatted down and grabbed at the pendant around Orphen’s neck.

“A mark of the Tower of Fangs... A dragon and a sword... I can see here that there’s a name engraved on the back to identify its holder...”

Orphen’s eyes narrowed for a moment as he realized what Salua was reading, but he didn’t do anything. Salua shrugged and released the pendant, having read the name ‘Krylancelo’ on the back. He wasn’t too surprised to find that the name he’d been given differed from the name he had read. Sorcerers from the Tower often used fake identities, and there were more than enough valid reasons in the world to mask one’s true name.

Krylancelo... Isn’t that one of Childman’s students? The so-called Successor of the Razor’s Edge...?

Salua quietly thought to himself. In all the history of mankind, there was one human that many would acknowledge to have reached the apex of the species’ potential. Childman. He knew that Krylancelo was one of the students to have studied under him, he knew that Krylancelo was one of the most capable Black

Sorcerers on the continent, and he knew that he had absconded from the Tower of Fangs over 5 years ago... He certainly hadn't expected to run into such a legend in a dingy dungeon like this.

But that information was all he needed...

"Hrmph..." Salua muttered as he dug a small object out of his bag. It was a switchblade. He pressed a button and the edge shot out, glimmering in the dim light.

Majic saw this and cried out. "Wh-What are you doing?!" Just as Salua had expected, he stood up and rushed over.

Amateur...

Salua grabbed the charging Majic's head and smashed it into a wall, immobilizing him. The boy was completely out cold.

Upon seeing this, Volkan began to loudly cheer. "You're saving me?! Hell yeah! I knew I was right to believe in you, friend!"

Salua turned back to the prone Orphen and, flourishing his blade in the air for a moment, drove it down towards the man's throat. If he couldn't avoid it, then the legend of Krylancelo would end right there on that day. Salua closed his eyes and felt impact, felt the knife drive into something that offered resistance. He opened his eyes... The blade was jabbed into the earthy ground. Orphen was nowhere to be seen.

He looked up and saw Orphen standing right next to him. He certainly looked pale and worse for wear, but he wasn't anywhere near as crippled as he had initially seemed.

"But... You can't move! What trickery is this?!" cried Salua.

Orphen answered with a weak grin and a few words. "You idiot. I've been taking it easy and resting on the floor all day long."

"You..." Salua scowled as he pulled his switchblade from the dirt and deftly threw it towards Orphen's body. The Sorcerer easily evaded it, and the knife kept sailing through the air until it lodged itself in Volkan's head.

"AUUUUUUUUUUGH!" screamed the dwarf as he began running around like a

headless chicken.

Orphen wasn't able to use his Sorcery, as it would leave him too open to Salua's attacks, so the best thing Salua could do was keep on an active offense. He clutched the knife in his right hand and moved as if to stab Orphen with it, but this was just a feint. His real plan was just to tackle Orphen with the left side of his body, and move to bring him down using leg sweeps.

But Orphen was more than ready for that kind of trickery. He expertly dodged the feint and tanked the body slam with his elbow before deftly dodging each and every one of Salua's kicks.

I knew it... This guy really is Krylancelo...!

Goosebumps ran up and down the man's body as he realized he was fighting a legend.

Salua lunged in and smacked Orphen in the face with his fist, causing the Sorcerer to reflexively close his left eye. Salua then used the blind spot to his advantage, following up with another hit. The two of them continued to trade blows, over and over again... The knife fell to the ground and it became a full-blown fistfight. Dodges, hits, dodges, hits... Repeating the same motions and mixing in new ones all at once. Orphen's focus was more evasive than offensive.

"Gaaaah!" screamed one of the men. Their bodies were growing weaker, number, but neither of them were operating on logic. They continued to move on reflex. Salua was pushed back, instinctively bringing his hand to the hilt of his blade... He couldn't win just by punching.

This guy's good... But I'll show him that I'm better!

Salua had an internal conflict, however. If he drew the blade, his identity would be revealed... So he would have to kill Orphen. He quietly resolved that he could do it. But... As Salua was about to draw his weapon, he noticed Orphen shifting his stance. His right hand was held out straight towards his enemy's body.

"Enough playing around. Draw it if you're ready to die," sneered the Sorcerer. He was gearing up to cast something, and Salua didn't like the look of that at all.

"Come now... Let's not do anything stupid..." he said, letting go of his

weapon.

Orphen lowered his hand in kind. “Oh? Not gonna draw your sword? Thought you needed it.”

Salua sighed and looked around the prison. Volkan had fainted after the knife lodged in his forehead, Dortin was still completely out cold, and Majic was very much concussed and unconscious from the impact with the wall.

“Everyone seems to be asleep...” said the man. Less witnesses.

“Maybe I should put you to sleep too, then,” said the Sorcerer.

Salua’s gaze was cold and reptilian as he responded. “Excitable, aren’t you? Brave, when facing down a Death Instructor.”

Orphen froze on the spot, glaring harder at the man before him. His own gaze seemed to match Salua’s own shift in attitude.

Orphen quietly muttered. “Those that go against the Kimluck Church’s teachings are often eliminated by their assassins. Assassins like you, who execute anyone who causes trouble for your religion. Death Instructors...”

“...Yes. I am Salua Solude, Death Instructor. And I’m afraid I can’t let you live.”

A noise quietly came from Salua. The sound of a material scraping against another, the sound of a bladed edge unsheathing. But... When he drew the sword, there was no visible blade at all. The weapon appeared to be invisible.

“A Death Instructor... with a glass sword...” muttered Orphen to himself.

What Salua wielded was the symbol of the Kimluck Church’s Death Instructors, a weapon that could not easily be avoided at close range. It was almost impossible to see the edge of death that sailed towards its victims. It would only take one stab to end things, Orphen knew that much.

“Now... Krylancelo. Successor of the Razor’s Edge... Are you ready to meet your end? I suppose it would be more satisfying if you were armed as well, but... This will have to do.”

Orphen slowly, wordlessly, raised his left arm forwards. He planned to release his Sorcery if necessary, and even sacrifice the arm if necessary. If he failed, then he’d just have to use his right. Sorcerers were capable of healing most any

injury so long as there wasn't considerable nerve damage. Healing fatal wounds was also out of the question. Human Black Sorcery just couldn't compare to the power of a Deep Dragon, after all.

Salua gripped his weapon and moved forwards.

Orphen's gaze intensified as he stared the assassin down, unyielding. He spoke up.

"Just what is an assassin from the Kimluck Church doing here?"

Salua sneered, unwilling to give an answer. Instead he shot back another question. "Just what is Krylancelo of the Tower of Fangs doing here, hm?!"

The two parties refused to give any ground to the other, silently staring each other down.

Orphen fearlessly took a deep breath, staring back at eyes that only stared at him.

Salua wasn't fearful either. He'd heard legends of Krylancelo's prowess, but as far as he was aware the man couldn't be as good as a trained assassin. He was certain he had the upper hand.

Orphen continued to stare the man down... Until he stared a little bit past Salua. For whatever reason, he was no longer looking the man in the eyes. He was looking at something behind him... And that's when his eyes grew wide, and his expression turned... Almost irritated.

"You dumbass! Are you trying to get killed?! I told you to go!" yelled Orphen all of a sudden.

"Eh?" said Salua, unsure what this sudden outburst meant. The man felt it may have been some kind of diversionary tactic. He braced his weapon, moved forwards, and...

"What the heck is going on here?!" came a girly, childish voice from behind him.

Salua felt a blunt object strike the back of his head. Then, silence. He fell flat on the ground, unconscious.



A groan came from the fallen man. Orphen bowed his head and looked down at him before sighing. The girl behind him shrieked out loud once she realized that there was blood pooling around his head.

“Eeeeeek!!” shrieked the girl, as she dropped her blade to the ground. The petite blonde yelled out once again before rushing forward. “Th-There’s so much blood!”

Orphen pinched the bridge of his nose before turning around to glare at her.

“No shit, you idiot!” he snapped, pointing a finger towards her. “Where the hell did you come from, anyway?!”

“...I sneaked in through the entrance, over there...” muttered Claiomh, pointing towards the stairwell.

“You snuck in?!” he growled. It seemed that she’d come in from behind Salua when he was focused on Orphen.

“Anyway, forget about that right now! I got help from the rangers. They’re waiting outside the village right now, I came on ahead to check out the situation and help you out!”

“...What the hell are you doing being a forward scout, huh? You should’ve had the rangers come with you, idiot!”

“Excuse me?!” Claiomh narrowed her eyes.

“Bah, whatever... More fool me for expecting you to do as you were told.”

Orphen and Claiomh looked around the dank prison. It was a surprise that the narrow cell could even fit six people in it, but it had managed. Volkan and Dortin were slumped against a nearby wall, Majic was unconscious on the ground and bleeding a bit about the head, while Salua was completely out cold on the ground. Claiomh pouted slightly as she looked down at the ground.

“Look...” she grumbled. “I just wanted to get back as soon as I could, alright? I was worried.”

“What, you thought I couldn’t handle myself?!”

“Well duh! Look what happened here! You’d have been a goner if you didn’t have my help!”

“Geez... You idiot, you call that help?!”

Orphen yelled, causing Claiomh to back down a little. Orphen walked over to Salua’s slumped form and pointed at the back of his head. “You could’ve killed him! He might already be dead, geez!”

Orphen squatted down and took a good look at Salua’s head. He was bleeding plenty, but there didn’t seem to be any fractures. He was about to begin the incantation necessary to heal the man, but he suddenly stopped. He turned and raised his head before looking down the hallway.

A girl in a soft silk dress stood on the stairway, she was holding a torch.

“Fiena...” grunted Orphen. Something felt off to him, and the vibes she emitted were unnerving.

“Who’s that?” asked Claiomh.

“She’s this village’s shrine maiden...”

Fiena walked closer, prompting Claiomh to smile and speak up.

“Wow! That dress is so cute... Can I touch it? Is that silk?”

She found her words falling upon deaf ears as Fiena continued walking on past her. She walked towards Salua and silently reached a hand out towards his wounded head. Not a word slipped past her lips, but his injuries began to rapidly heal over. She stood in place, then turned to face Majic. His own head wound began to close as well. Finally, she cast her glance towards Volkan and Dortin. A small clang rang out as the knife fell from the little oaf’s head, and his own injuries patched themselves up. Any part of Dortin that was roughed up quickly found itself healed as well.

Though their wounds were healed, nobody seemed to wake up. They simply breathed gently as if enjoying a peaceful sleep. It was likely that in order to fully recover from their wounds, they required continued rest. That was Orphen’s hypothesis, at least.

Finally, Fiena turned to Orphen and spoke softly.

“What happened...?” She stopped, turning around to see an over-eager Claiomh who was struggling to keep her fingers from twitching. Fiena sighed.

“...You may touch my clothing.”

“Yahoo!” Claiomh grinned before happily running her hands along the soft material.

Orphen let out a disgruntled sigh, “You really need to learn some manners... Aren’t you a noble?”

Claiomh responded by shooting a glare towards Orphen. He dutifully ignored it. He picked up her fallen blade and wiped the bloodied area off with a handkerchief, and then moved to hand it back over.

“Claiomh, listen...”

“I don’t wanna hear it!” She waved a hand at him while sheathing her blade with the other. “I know you’re just gonna tell me to go someplace safe!”

“That’s right. I am. You need to leave this village and group up with the rangers.”

“There’s no way! We’re partners, aren’t we? I can’t just bail!”

“You’re not wrong. But that’s why I’m trusting you to secure the escape route for us.”

Orphen turned before grabbing Fiena by the shoulder and walking towards the exit with her. Claiomh yelled back “R-Right! Fine! I’ll secure the escape route!”

“Attagirl. Partners share responsibility, so don’t forget it.” Orphen spoke with a hint of cheekiness in his tone. This only caused Claiomh to pout.

“Do you hate me or something?”

“Not in the least, but as you are you’ll only get in my way.”

“Hmph!” grumbled Claiomh before charging up to Fiena and staring her in the eyes. She slowly brought her face so close that her nose almost pressed up against the girl’s. *In the way, am I? Well what about her?!* She thought. She continued to stare at Fiena. Fiena stared back. Neither of them blinked. Eventually, Claiomh simply gave up.

“Buh... Fine! I’ll secure the escape route...”

“Don’t make a move until tomorrow morning.”

“Fine...!”

Claiomh said her goodbyes before scampering up the stairs and leaving. Orphen listened for a while to make sure that her footsteps actually pattered away.

Fiena suddenly spoke up. “So... you are a Sorcerer, then?”

“I am. And I’m becoming acutely aware that we’re running out of time.” Orphen sighed, glaring into the girl’s averted eyes. “We need to leave this place. The whole lot of us.”

Fiena responded by clenching her fists and shaking her head. “Tomorrow... Please... Before the morning comes, please escape this village with Salua and Majic. You must.”

Orphen nodded, and generally found the idea agreeable. Given that Claiomh had brought guards with her, they could easily escape the village without too much of a hassle. So long as the girl wasn’t planning on bringing a Deep Dragon with her, they’d be able to get out without a hitch.

“...But I’ll be staying here,” muttered Fiena.

Orphen’s eyes went wide in shock. “What?! But if you do that, MacDougal will just use you for whatever it is he’s planning!”

“I know that, but...” Fiena’s voice grew weaker, to the point where he could barely hear her words.

“Look... I don’t know what you know... But we’re never gonna reach any kind of peace so long as this kind of crap goes on.”

“I know...!” bemoaned Fiena as she knelt down and began moving Salua’s unconscious body into a more comfortable position. “This man... Do you know who he is?”

“I do,” said Orphen. “An assassin with the Kimluck Church. I know for a fact that very few glass blades exist on the Continent, and he happens to be wielding one. I can’t trust anyone like that.” He gestured towards the invisible sword on the ground, which caused Fiena to glance at it as well.

“I know... He told me, too. I wanted it to be a lie, but it seems that wasn’t the case.”

She glanced from the sword once more to Salua’s face. Orphen found himself subconsciously comparing the girl to Claiomh. Even though this girl was clearly younger, she seemed a lot more mature and caring when it came to others. Orphen then made another realization as he continued to follow her line of sight.

Majic... you’re gonna get heartbroken, but I think she already has her sights on another man...

“Do you know his purpose here?” asked Fiena.

“I don’t, no. I just know he’s here for something, and it’s probably bad news.”

Fiena let out a sigh. “You know... When I heard there was a Sorcerer in the area, I headed out for a walk. I knew I’d need to find them before MacDougal did... That’s how I stumbled upon Majic. When I saw him, I realized he was simply a lost boy...”

“...I don’t care about that. Tell me why the assassin is here,” muttered Orphen.

Fiena continued to look down at Salua’s face. “He’s here... As MacDougal’s assassin. That has been his goal the entire time. MacDougal was a professor at the Kimluck Church some many years ago...”

“...He was in deep at the Kimluck Church?”

The Kimluck Church was headquartered at the northern end of the Continent, and it ruled over many affairs from there. It was said that its power and influence was second only to the royal family. The Kimluck Church hated Sorcery with a passion, and it was known that they employed assassins to take care of those that stood in their way... Or simply to eliminate those deemed too powerful to live. Orphen recalled an incident when he was a child, when he was reading in the library at the Tower of Fangs. An assassin disguised himself as a visitor and came to take Childman’s life. He was, obviously, unsuccessful. Killing a Sorcerer was no easy feat.

“So, wait. Is MacDougal still with the church? What about the cult? What

exactly is going on with this village?”

Fiena’s expression stiffened a bit. “I...”

“Tell me!” Orphen exclaimed.

“I don’t know!” she yelled back.

Orphen found himself surprised by her sudden outburst. Fiena responded with a small blush. “I’m sorry... This is all a little much for me.”

“It’s fine... I just need to know more details.”

“I know...” she sighed, before finally gathering herself and continuing. “He... He came here, three years ago. He brought specialists from the Kimluck Church. The village was already here, it was just less fanciful. It was MacDougal’s men who built the tower and the workshop... The workshop used for manufacturing firearms.”

“What? But that’s a royal secret. Only the king’s men are allowed to carry guns, anyway!”

“From what I heard, MacDougal stole a gun from one of the king’s men, and successfully reverse-engineered it. According to Salua, the Kimluck Church has been intent on producing their own firearms for some time now. When MacDougal came to this village, he was regarded as a savior because he brought medicine... He helped so many of our people.”

“And then what?” Orphen urged. He was disturbed by the news. Studying pistols was one thing, but actually recreating them was another thing entirely.

“Then they made him their chief... But MacDougal never intended to lead anyone here. Ever since he came here, the believers became more active... Which is no surprise, given what he said.”

“What did he say?”

“That he was going to use the pistols to fight against the Sorcerers, that it would level the playing field. But he said he needed to enter the heart of the forest to really bring out the full potential of his war effort.”

“Didn’t he know about the Deep Dragons?” grumbled Orphen. Mankind had typically stayed clear of the forest depths because of the Fenrir’s wrath.

“He knew, but he wished to seek out the Dragon and use its power... And then he found me.”

“He wants to use the Dragon’s Sorcery through you?”

“Yes.”

“This guy’s a total idiot,” groaned Orphen.

It was true that Fiena could use the same magic as the Deep Dragons, but she was hardly as skilled as one. If one were to compare her with the Deep Dragon that he had encountered some time ago, then she was clumsy to a fault. It was like she wasn’t even the owner of the power, as if she were drawing it from something else entirely. A Dragon simply wasn’t measurable in human power levels. That much was clear to Orphen.

“But... I’ve dug my own grave in using my power like this... Tomorrow, the village will face its own ruin. I need you to escape before then. I need you to take Salua and Majic with you.”

Orphen looked down into the girl’s eyes. She was tearing up.

“Salua was the only person who treated me like a friend. He always came to visit me, even if he wasn’t always outwardly sweet... I’ve lived alone my whole life, but his company always made me happier.”

Orphen understood her loneliness well. The Tower of Fangs was no place for camaraderie, and sincere friendships were rarely forged. Growing up he had nobody to truly confide in... Though now he did have Majic... And Claiomh. He’d sent her away, and now he was with a new person. A person he could probably call kindred.

“I refuse to leave.”

Orphen’s response caused Fiena to stare at him in shock. He continued. “If you’re going to be in this village when it’s destroyed, then I refuse to leave.”

“But...”

Orphen took a few steps forward and grabbed the girl by the arm.

“O-Ow!” she yelped.

“Listen to me,” Orphen growled. “Do you really think I could leave you behind knowing what’s going to happen to you? Get a grip, idiot.”

He let her go, and Fiena rubbed at the area he’d seized. Orphen could only sigh in disappointment as he ruminated over the fact that the cowering little girl in front of him contained a Sorcery far more terrifying and potent than his own.

Women... It’s always women!

But he really had no time to grumble about his problems. Dawn was fast approaching.

After Fiena left, the first to wake was Salua. He quietly picked up his blade and put it back into the scabbard. He also grabbed Volkan and Dortin, intent on dragging them back with him to the servant’s quarters.

“I’ll deal with MacDougal,” said Orphen, as the man made his way out.

“...Very well, Krylancelo. But don’t expect me to forget you,” replied Salua.

“...Why’d you even attack me to begin with?”

“Well... Who knows...” grinned the man.

“Man, whatever... I don’t see what’s so funny... If you wanna know what happened after you conked out, then go ask Fiena about it.”

He waved off the man. It wasn’t too much later until Majic woke up... But it still took a while for his concussion to clear. Orphen neglected to inform the boy about his exchange with Fiena.

Chapter V: MacDougal's Secret

Orphen's headache had finally subsided. He was walking through the village streets early in the morning. He'd managed to leave the tower by simply walking out of the entrance, though there was the small matter of the two guardsmen he had to rough up. Even though it was barely dawn, most of the villagers were awake. Orphen was walking through the streets alongside them.

He looked at them. Young women, children, older men, frail men, stocky men... Hard workers and layabouts. He had to force himself to stop examining them all after a while. The young men of the village practically blended into the scenery as they walked by. It wasn't like he hadn't been noticed, either. The villagers recognized that he wasn't one of their own, and cast suspicious or disdainful eyes towards him as he moved. It was pretty obvious what he was, given his black attire and his necklace. He just had to be thankful nobody had started hurling rocks at him.

He became acutely aware of the fear surrounding him as he walked on by, but he didn't much care if they were afraid of him or not. He only wanted one person to be afraid of him, MacDougal. He kept on marching towards his destination, southwards from the tower... MacDougal's estate.

He finally reached the house, and found it to be a lot more modest than he'd expected. It was a very simple home, like most others in the vicinity. It had a small garden with flowers, and wooden-built walls. Orphen saw no reason to knock, he simply placed his hand on the door handle to see if it was locked. It was. Seeing no other option, Orphen decided to smash it open. Just as he ran back and attempted a forward charge, the door was unlocked and opened... by Salua.

"It's early, you know..." muttered the man.

Salua looked much as he did last night, except he wasn't wielding his blade this time. He continued speaking, "MacDougal's still sleeping, he had a late night."

"Well, I came to drag him out of bed."

Orphen had no intentions of talking, he pushed past Salua and entered the house.

“What exactly are you doing?” asked Salua.

“You know what. Fiena said the village is gonna be destroyed, I’m not about to stand around and let that happen.”

“You can’t be serious. Why now? Wait a while, let him flee... Then do what you want with him. It won’t be any of my business.”

“I don’t care what you want, assassin. I’m going in.”

Orphen continued through the house... And it was a hell of a mess. The floor was littered with cheap liquor bottles, and a heap of dirty clothing lay in a pile in the corner of the room. It was pretty obvious that MacDougal and his men had spent a rowdy evening here. Salua walked after Orphen.

“...Salua, did a bull come charging through here or something?”

“This is just the aftermath of last night’s meeting... They drank rather fast... The wine was top-notch, after all.”

“Yeah, sounds like a hell of a party...” Orphen grumbled, inspecting a few empty bottles. “Where the hell is MacDougal?”

“In his bedroom... I’d direct you to the other men first, but they’ve already gone home.”

Orphen walked through into the hallway and suddenly heard a panicked voice coming from one of the rooms, “Wh-Who is that? Who’s talking out there?” Orphen ignored the person. He noticed a door that was slightly ajar, and moved to investigate. He opened it up and saw another mess of a room. There was clothing all over the floor, and even a gas lamp near some fabric... That would’ve been dangerous if it spilled over. What he found more amusing, however, was the snoring, half-naked young woman wrapped up in the bedsheets. Her hair was messy, and her feet were sticking out of the end of the bed. Orphen cast a curious glance towards Salua, who had just come in behind him.

“... This is my room, you know.”

Orphen backed out of the room and closed the door.

“Are you sure you’re religious?”

“... Uhh, kinda? I just need to play the part, that’s all. Who needs to know I’m with Kimluck? This is for the sake of infiltration.”

Orphen just stared blankly as Salua continued.

“It’s a real pain. I need to pretend to get drunk every night... I have to interact with women, and everything! I’m going to pretty great measures to disguise my intentions here.”

“... Whatever, I don’t really care,” sighed Orphen. “So, which one’s his bedroom? If you told me from the beginning, I would’ve just gone there instead...”

Salua shrugged and pointed out a door, and Orphen opened it immediately.

This room was probably the most neat and orderly in the house, Orphen couldn’t find a thing out of place. It certainly seemed fitting for a member of the Kimluck Church. Orphen walked a little closer towards MacDougal, who didn’t seem to be all that asleep anymore.

“Nice morning, isn’t it?” said Orphen.

“Of course it is... Mornings are always pleasant in this sacred place,” replied the older man.

“Even when it rains?”

“Especially when it rains... There’s always a sense of serenity in this place... You know, Sorcerer... The end is nigh.”

“Hah. Spouting off cheesy lines like that really makes it obvious you’re with the Kimluck Church.”

MacDougal’s eyes went wide, and he seemed to be shaken.

“What do you mean by that, Sorcerer?!” asked MacDougal.

“Yeah! What do you mean?” repeated Salua.

Orphen sighed and shrugged. “Behind me is an assassin from the Kimluck Church. In front of me is a professor from the Kimluck Church. Deny it or not,

just don't annoy me with your prattling."

Salua moved towards Orphen, but it was too late. Orphen jumped back and stretched his hand out towards the man. "Guide me thus, Death Starling!"

As he spoke, the Sorcery rocked through Salua's body in the form of a shockwave, causing him to tumble to the ground. "Bastard!" screamed Salua as he writhed in pain. He couldn't get up due to the weakened state of his body.

"I don't have any intentions of working with a Kimluck assassin," sneered Orphen. "Besides, you'd only get in the way of my exchange."

"Your... Exchange?" said MacDougal.

"Fiena," replied Orphen.

MacDougal's eyes went wide.

"Nothing more, nothing less. I want Fiena. We can avoid any more deaths if you stop whatever you're planning and let her go."

MacDougal shook his head, "Nonsense! Don't be foolish... I'm well aware of the risks here, but I must undertake them! This Continent is headed towards damnation, don't you see? We must ascend beyond the Dragons and claim yet an even greater power..."

"You sound afraid, MacDougal. What's your deal?"

"...None of your concern, Sorcerer. All my fears are rooted in the past."

Orphen's vision went white for a moment. He staggered and fell to the ground alongside pieces of a broken vase. MacDougal had struck him without a moment's hesitation. His head was bleeding.

"Stop, MacDougal!" roared Orphen, but the older man was already up. He ran across the room and rifled in a container. Finally, he pulled out a pistol and pointed it down at Orphen.

"Such arrogance! You're a mere Sorcerer! Don't think you can win so easily!"

"Gh... Big words for a stubborn old man."

"Sorcerers are an abomination upon this world! You cannot be allowed to live! Do you understand what your kind has done?! Not two-hundred years ago,

during the war between Sorcerers and Weird Dragons...”

“Pah! What we did was win! Win and create a future filled with petty, envious people like you!”

“Insolent child! Do you truly believe the divine could be defeated so easily? Do you truly believe the Queen of Dragons has fallen?!”

MacDougal yelled out as his finger moved towards the trigger. Orphen quickly began to recite an incantation.

“I release thee...!”

Click

Orphen expected to hear that sound... But it never came. Instead the smashing sound of another vase rang out as MacDougal was bashed over the head. Salua had come to Orphen’s rescue.

“Traitorous bastard!” yelled MacDougal as he fell to the ground and fired his gun. The bullet lodged in the doorway. Orphen tilted his head towards the point of impact just in time to see out into the hallway. A door opened out there, and Volkan waddled out with his brother following after.

Orphen saw his golden opportunity. He quickly pivoted and swept Salua’s legs. Now all he had to do was pull himself back up and scramble out of the room. He’d been struck, but he had enough power to escape. Orphen ran out of the doorway and slammed the door behind him. He began running down the hallway as MacDougal charged out after him and took aim with his pistol.

BANG

The gun went off, but another opening door blocked the bullet. The woman from Salua’s bedroom had happened to come out at just the right time. Orphen groaned and pushed her back into the room she came from. “Get down, you idiot!” He then used the door as a shield before casting a spell on it.

“I release thee, Sword of Light!”

A wave of searing light punched right through the door, burning the entire corridor as the blast shook the house to its foundations. The initial burst subsided, and the door was no longer a door. The other end of the corridor had

MacDougal laying on the ground with a few of the wooden splinters embedded in his body. The pistol had been blasted right out of his hand.

“Wake up, MacDougal,” sneered Orphen as he walked over to the wounded man.

The mustached man slowly opened his eyes. He could do nothing but groan.

“Look. These injuries you have? They’re fatal. You’re going to die if nothing is done... But I can use my Sorcery to heal you. If you tell me what you know, I’ll let you live.”

MacDougal merely responded with quiet groans. Orphen couldn’t tell if it was because he was too wounded to talk, or simply because he was too disgusted by the idea of being healed through Sorcery.

“Tell me. Tell me what you know about the Kimluck Church! Tell me what you saw, what they’re trying to achieve!”

“Hgh...” MacDougal continued to groan weakly.

“You seriously wanna die that much, bastard?!”

MacDougal continued to quietly stare at Orphen, simply refusing to talk.



"Ghh... You really are an idiot."

Orphen closed his eyes as he placed a hand on MacDougal's body, uttering out the incantation of healing Sorcery as he did so.

The spell did its work, and MacDougal's injuries were promptly healed. Even the smallest scratch on MacDougal's body was restored. So too was his vitality.

"Fufu... Mhuhuhu..." MacDougal started quietly laughing to himself as he reached his hand beneath his body, and drew his pistol...

Orphen gasped out in shock, unable to react as the older man suddenly brought the muzzle of the gun to his own temple.

BANG

He seemed to pull the trigger, pulverizing bone and brains. MacDougal's body fell limp like a puppet with cut strings. Blood began to pool from the open wound and dribble down all over the man's body. And, with that, MacDougal took himself and every secret he held to the grave.

"What?!" Orphen stood up, still trying to process what had just happened.

"Your sorcery, Krylancelo. It heated the gun to an unfathomable degree and fused it to his hand. It was only a matter of time before the heated cylinder fired off a round, I suppose he just left it to fate... Or rather, he chose to die here. But you're the one that killed him." Salua stood nearby, standing next to the half-naked woman from his room.

"Well, I suppose my work here is done. Killing him in the village would've been too risky, but I imagine most people would think I'm the culprit here... And I don't really want a group of angry villagers with torches and pitchforks coming after me."

The woman next to him seemed mortified, "Wh-What happened?! Wh-Why is he dead?!"

Salua simply grinned and winked. "Because today's not such a bad day after all... Isn't that right, Krylancelo?"

Orphen didn't respond.

“Well, then... I’ll be fleeing the village. There’s no need for more bloodshed... so make sure Fiena is safe.”

Orphen finally spoke. “How are you so nonchalant after all of this?”

“Isn’t that normal? It’s my job. I see this kind of thing from time to time.” He shrugged and walked back towards the entrance of the house. “I can’t exactly say this was an ideal outcome for me, but... It was nice meeting you, traitor.”

And, just like that, Salua was gone. Orphen shook his head slowly as he sighed to himself.

You hated Sorcery that much, MacDougal? That you’d rather off yourself than take it?

“Whatever. You’re dead now, and I don’t have time to mourn a fool.” Orphen quietly sighed as he wiped blood from his face, quietly lamenting the fact that he couldn’t get anything out of the old man before he died. Even though MacDougal’s head had been blasted apart, the lower half of his face was curled into an oddly serene smile.

Orphen’s melancholy was broken by a familiar, shrill voice outside. “Come one, come all!” the dwarven bastard started screaming. “Come and see what’s happened!”

Orphen suddenly remembered what Salua said about angry villagers, and a sinking feeling ran through him.

Volkan was outside... Rallying up the townspeople.

“Gather and see, people! Wake up! The wicked Sorcerer has slain our kind master!”

“...You have got to be shitting me.”

Orphen scowled as he heard a mob of people outside. They didn’t exactly sound all that happy.



“Maaaaan! I’m so bored!” yelled Claiomh, still squatting in the bushes outside town. The men she was with all nodded in agreement.

The rangers she was with were all around thirty years old, and had accompanied her after hearing her story. They were just on the outskirts of the village, not too far from some houses. They were in a position comfortable enough that would prevent any of the townspeople from seeing them, though.

“I really can’t wait much longer...” complained one of the men.

He didn’t really like the idea of a young lady like Claiomh being armed, but he supposed it was necessary to keep her safe and well. He and his comrades didn’t have swords, they had long truncheon-like bars used to bluntly beat people, and block attack. It was standard-issue equipment for peacekeeping forces.

“Why didn’t we rescue them yesterday, again?”

“Because we can’t yet! Orphen said not to move until this morning...”

“Why is the hostage commanding the rescuers, again?”

Claiomh wanted to bash the impatient man over the head, but she kept her composure and looked out into the village.

“Look, why don’t we try drawing a plan? What’s the best mode of entry?” Claiomh said, but the soldiers weren’t listening. One of the men began to grumble loudly to himself.

“My momma always told me to keep away from blondes... Now I’m starting to see why...”

“Hey, enough of that!” snapped the girl. She suddenly felt something brush against her leg, and she looked down. There was a fluffy tail sticking out of the grass, batting against her leg now and then.

“Huh...? What’s this?”

Claiomh prodded one of the soldiers and asked for elaboration.

“Beats me. A dog?” shrugged the man.

Claiomh reached down and touched the tail before muttering, “Do dog’s usually have such... Damp tails?”

“...Damp?”

The soldiers all stiffened at her comment for some reason. She suddenly grabbed it and picked it up, and the form of what appeared to be a little black puppy emerged from the undergrowth. The pup wiggled its tail in an attempt to free itself from her grasp; it was clearly smarter than your average puppy. It stared into Claiomh's eyes, its own visage displaying deep emerald-green hues.

"I-It's... It's a Deep Dragon!" one of the guards shrieked.

"A Deep Dragon...?"

Claiomh looked down at the puppy and gave it a gentle pet. It was indeed a baby Deep Dragon. The little creature pressed its nose against Claiomh's hands, causing the girl to giggle. She almost couldn't believe that this was the same species of monstrously dangerous beast that Orphen had spoken of.

Claiomh turned around to speak to the soldiers but had found their weapons were drawn, and they fully intended to beat the puppy to death.

"What are you doing?!" she screamed, shielding the Deep Dragon from their attacks. The force of the blow caused her to fall to the ground. "Gah...!"

The soldiers suddenly came to their senses. None of them had expected her to move into their line of attack. "H-Hey..." one of them said. "Are you alright?"

"...How very dare you!" screamed a livid Claiomh. "Why would you do that?! It's just a child, isn't it?!" Though she was yelling, the Deep Dragon seemed very comfortable and at home in her arms. She pulled herself up and glared at the men.

One of them finally spoke up, "That's a Deep Dragon, don't you see? Encountering one of them in this place means doom for the lot of us."

"Shut up!" yelled Claiomh, before quieting her own voice. "The villagers will hear us... Don't you find it strange that a Deep Dragon is so close to a human village anyw-"

Before she could finish her sentence, Claiomh felt an ominous presence wash over them. She slowly turned around and looked deeper into the forest. Fear began to engulf her being as she noticed the massive black creature. It stood deadly still, and was merely looking at them.

“H-How didn’t we notice that until now?” she muttered.

“Th-They say that Deep Dragons can hide inside their own sh-shadows...” said a ranger.

“O-Oh god...” said another, “we’re done for now...”

“M-My momma was right... Blondes... Not even once!”

Claiomh stayed still as she could, quietly surveying the Deep Dragon. It stood at about four meters tall and had a thick black coat of fur. Its snout faced towards her, and its eyes were as deep and emerald green as the puppy’s were. She thought to herself that it was a beautiful creature, and perhaps understood just why there were those that would worship it.

The Deep Dragon moved forwards, inch by inch, until it was right next to Claiomh. Slowly, it moved its maw towards her, and gently took the puppy into its mouth, safely carrying it away from her.

I guess it’s her child... thought Claiomh, *but what are they doing so close to the village?*

“What are you here for?”

Her question was met with no answer.

“I said... What are y-“

She stopped. Because she realized something. Another Deep Dragon had appeared nearby. And another. And another. Claiomh, frozen in fear, turned around to look once more... Before she knew it, the very village was surrounded by Deep Dragons. They all stood in perfect silence, staring towards the middle of the village. The three men accompanying her had gone weak at the knees. They refused to accept the terrifying reality in front of them. There were more than a few dozen of the terrifying beasts in the vicinity now, and their gazes were all transfixed on the village. Even an army of elite Sorcerer’s couldn’t hope to take them out... And Claiomh had nowhere to go. She was now caught between the village, and an endless wave of bestial Sorcery.

She suddenly felt something batting at her leg again. The baby Deep Dragon had walked back over to her. She sighed as she picked it back up... Its mother

didn't particularly seem to mind this time. Claiomh decided that no matter what was about to come, they would face it down.

Chapter VI: Swift Slaughter

An axe-wielding man charged on ahead as he busted down the door. "You bastard Sorcerer!" he screamed. Another rushed in from behind him, and another. They were making a beeline for Orphen down a hallway. Orphen shook his head before outstretching his palm and casting the Angel's Breath sorcery. A pulse of wind blasted down the hall and knocked them back. Orphen winced slightly as the larger man collided with the smaller behind him, but he couldn't pay them any heed.

"I release thee, Sword of Light!" cried Orphen, blasting a hole in the wall with intense, searing heat. He made a frantic run for it, but the people soon caught on and chased after him. Orphen made a little distance before turning towards the house and stretching his hand towards it. "... Lucky I'm not charging you for a burial, MacDougal..." he muttered, before releasing his incantation. "I crush thee, Primordial Silence!"

The center of the house began to collapse in on itself, almost as if it were imploding. Then, it was followed up by a deafeningly loud noise. An explosion rocked the area as the house blew apart, causing debris to scatter around the area. The people who were following him stopped, horrified at his display of power, but it didn't hinder them for long. Orphen felt bad for the people who were in or around the house, but he rationalized that it probably wasn't fatal. The noise of the collapsing house joined the cacophonous chorus of screaming and yelling villagers. Orphen decided to make the most of this opportunity.

"I release thee, Sword of Light!"

He sent out a blast of searing heat in a random direction, setting a few houses aflame. His intention was to sow some confusion as he made his escape... but he was quickly spotted again.

"There he is, get him!"

Orphen responded with more Sorcery. "I call on thee, Sisters of Rupture!"

His spell caused the air itself to vibrate, and the people who were giving chase

fell to the grounds, clutching their heads. All but one of them, at least. He looked around in shock before picking up a brick and throwing it at Orphen. “T-Take this!” he yelled, before being shoved down by Orphen and kicked in the head.

“You bastards are more trouble than you’re worth!”

Even if Orphen was able to throw half of the village into disarray, the other half was still wise to his trickery. He continued running, when...

“Master!”

He heard a familiar voice. It was Majic, waving towards him from across the street.

“What the hell are you doing here, Majic?!” yelled Orphen. The kid had to be out of his mind.

“Th-That’s what I want to explain! I want to get Fiena so we could escape, but she wasn’t in her room in the tower!”

“What the hell, kid! You can’t do anything right, can you?! Just let me take care of it, and leave!”

“B-But Master, MacDougal could hurt her...!”

Orphen charged over and grabbed Majic by the scruff of his collar. “Listen. Head out of the village and meet up with Claiomh. I’ll handle the rest, okay?”

“F-Fine, if that’s what you think, Master!”

“Please do. I’m sick of people not listening to me... Especially when I have their best interests in mind.” Orphen sighed and wiped the sweat from his brow. The chaos in the village was causing the background temperature to rise quite a bit.

Suddenly... Obnoxious laughter began to ring through the village.

“Majic,” Orphen suddenly said. “Do not engage with him. I will deal with it.”

“R-Right... That goes without saying...”

The laughter continued to ring out. It was painfully irritating to hear. “Wuhahahaaaaah! Villagers! The time has come to purge the Sorcerer from

these lands! Not because of any personal grudges, or anything! Not because he's a stingy old loan shark, but because of... Righteousness and justice!"

It was Volkan, of course, already riling up the villagers. Orphen couldn't tell where the yelling was coming from, so he clambered on to a roof to figure it out. He saw Volkan marching through the streets leading Dortin and a group of villagers. Except the villagers he was leading and rallying were... Literally just children.

Orphen slapped his palm into his face and let out a long sigh. Eventually, he extended his hand towards the little idiot.

"I construct thee, Spire of the Sun!"

Volkan was quite suddenly surrounded by a pillar of flames.

"Eeeek!"

The children following him all scatted in fear, and even Dortin ran underneath a nearby porch. Volkan danced around in a panic until, finally, the fire vanished. The little guy had no doubts in his mind as to who had done this.

He suddenly noticed Orphen on the roof and started jeering, "You monster! Did you not care about burning those children?! They're just children, Orphen! I'm going to call social services, Orphen! Just wait until noon comes, you rat! I'll activate my ultimate surprise trump card attack!"

Dortin quietly muttered, "H-He doesn't have one of those..."

Orphen was in no mood for nonsense. "That's enough out of you, you little wretch! You keep putting people's lives in danger for no good reason, and you'll turn on anyone at the drop of a hat!"

"That's rich coming from you, you trigger-happy murderer! I'll see you lynched for your crimes!"

"Me?! They'd sooner lynch you, you cockroach!"

"You fool! These villagers love me! My voice is music to their ears, making sweet audible love to them! I am a charmer, don't you see?! They'll see you for who you are...!"

"...Alright, that's it...! I release thee, Sword of Light!"

Orphen pointed his hand right at Volkan, engulfing him in an explosive force.



The resulting blast knocked the dwarf out cold.

“How do you like that? Not so big-mouthed now!”

Orphen then heard a yell from behind him. It was Majic. The boy was being forced to climb up on to the roof by a massive crowd of angry villagers. Orphen and Majic were completely surrounded on all sides. “Welp. This is great,” he muttered.

Majic sniffled and yelled, “What do we do?!”

Orphen responded by grabbing Majic hard by the shoulders. “O-Ow!” the boy cried.

“Shut up, if I let go then you’ll die.”

“What?”

“I’m using Sorcery to get us out of here.”

“I-I didn’t know that was possible...”

“Usually it isn’t. It’s gonna be a bumpy ride, but I’ll give it my best shot. Don’t say a word. I’m transferring your Sorcery and combining it with my own, we’ll make it further that way.”

“R-Right!”

There was no time for either of them to waste on thinking, the villagers had their weapons drawn and were already clambering up to the rooftop.

“If this spell fails, then our bodies will burn up and evaporate. If there’s an obstacle where we’re meant to land, we might end up getting fused to it and killed. If you move, or I let go of you, then the air might combust and kill everyone here... us included. There are too many variables.” He paused, before looking down at the village. “These people will struggle to their last breath. Will you?”

“I...” Majic muttered. “You’re asking if I want to die?”

“No.” Orphen shook his head. “I’m asking if you want to live. These people are doing whatever they can.”

“...Then yes, I want to survive.”

Orphen sighed. One of the men had already made it up to the roof. He charged at the duo with a shovel. Orphen couldn't afford to waste any of the energy he was siphoning from Majic, but he lunged forward and smacked the man regardless. "Take that, you bastard!" he yelled.

The man fell off the roof.



"Seems you made it," Salua muttered, looking over towards Fiena. She was clad in ordinary clothing and wore a brown cloak, obscuring most of her features. The village seemed to be in an uproar, and an explosion had rung out earlier, but that was far from them now.

Fiena looked down as she addressed the man. "...Did you not manage to bring her?"

"Who do you mean?" Salua tilted his head.

"...The servant woman from MacDougal's house. Were you two not lovers?"

"...Me, and that woman?"

Salua sighed. It wasn't like he had special feelings for that servant or anything. Salua wanted to make that clear enough to Fiena.

I'd rather you didn't think of me as some charmer... I'm not some hero. I'm just an assassin...

Salua spoke up. "She ran off in the confusion, but I'm sure it's better that she stay with her own people." He shrugged.

Fiena remained silent.

"It's better that we use this chance to escape. The Sorcerer is causing a disaster in the village, we can use that to our advantage. If it's Majic you're concerned about, then I promise you he's in no danger."

Fiena smiled for a brief moment, "You're right... He can't die here."

Still, an uneasy feeling nestled in Fiena's bosom as she looked back to the village.

"Okay... I'm ready," she said.

Salua nodded. “MacDougal’s dead, so I doubt the villagers will treat you too kindly if they find you. We need to survive until then.”

“Where are we going...?”

“My hometown. As far as anyone else is concerned while we make the journey, you’re my daughter. We can go and meet my brother and figure things out from there.”

“Ah, I’d like to meet your brother, then!”

“I doubt it, honestly.” Salua gently smiled, and patted the girl on the head.

He turned back towards the village and faintly heard Orphen yelling some kind of Sorcerous incantation.

“...There’s no way he could die in a place like this, neither he nor his apprentice.”

Fiena nodded by his side, and the two made their way into the forest.



Majic and Orphen stood breathlessly on the rooftop, having defended themselves from a few incoming villagers. Orphen turned to Majic as if to ask if he was going to be okay.

Majic silently shook his head.

...For what it’s worth you’re holding out incredibly well, for a kid... thought Orphen. He was tremendously impressed by Majic’s displays of Sorcery when repelling the villagers.

“That’s enough.”

Five men appeared, and their leader spoke up. All of them were wielding pistols.

“Oh boy, it’s MacDougal’s favorite lackeys, huh?” spoke Orphen in a sardonic tone.

“Don’t you dare make a mockery, you Sorcerer bastard!” screamed the man. “You killed our savior, and we will avenge him!”

“Sure... Sounds like fun. But what’s the point in doing that? Shouldn’t you be

picking out a new leader? Why don't you aim elsewhere? You won't fix your problems just by killing us."

"What... What do you mean?" The man seemed confused.

Orphen grinned. "What, you don't have a succession plan in place? Did you think MacDougal was gonna live forever? Which of you takes over now he's gone? Which of you fixes the village?"

The men all turned to look at each other, hesitating for a moment. Orphen took full advantage of the opportunity.

"Oh dear, none of you are fit to rule at all... You're too easily distracted!"

Orphen grabbed on to Majic for dear life and began to recite an incantation...

"I dance within thee...!"

The men raised their pistols once more.

"Heavenly Castle!"

"Uwaaaaaah!" cried Majic as Orphen suddenly used Sorcery to leap them to another rooftop. They hadn't left the village, for some reason. Orphen quickly steadied himself before yelling out, "I release thee, Sword of Light!"

A sudden blast of heat and energy struck the rooftop they had just jumped from, burning it to pieces and causing the armed men to fall off the sides.

"Yahoo!" yelled Majic, but the villagers simply moved to surround the house they were now standing on top of instead. Orphen just grinned.

"I'm in a better situation to play around with them, now!"

Orphen took a more hostile pose as energy flowed through him, the energy he'd drained from Majic and added to his own reserves. He felt like his body was light as a feather, all of a sudden. His body was enveloped by newfound strength. But, just before he could prepare his next move...

Whooooom

A ringing sound like rushing water filled everyone's ears. A bright, unfathomably bright light blinded everyone's eyes. Orphen managed to gain his vision back quickly; he glanced around. Majic had fallen over and was clutching

his head. They looked towards the center of the village... And it was gone. There was nothing left but an enormous crater.

“What the...”

Orphen stared at the smoldering crater where the tower and workshop used to be... And quickly became aware of the presences surrounding him. He quickly became aware of the Deep Dragons that were now everywhere.

The villagers stared on in absolute shock, unsure how to proceed.

Finally, the voice of a girl broke the silence, “Orphen!” she yelled. It was Claiomh. She was in the center of the village, atop the back of one of the Fenrir. She clutched an infant Deep Dragon in her arms, and three cowering men stood behind her.

Orphen and the villagers were extremely confused by the sight.

“O-Orphen! The Deep Dragons... they’re really not happy!”

“What?”

“They’re saying that they’re going to kill everyone in the village!”

As she spoke, one of the Deep Dragons opened its eyes wide, and searing hot flames... White fire, spread out across every last inch of land the beast surveyed. Buildings evaporated in seconds, metal boiled, and people were turned to dust. Orphen instinctively covered his face with his arms, but even the air itself was hot enough to cause great pain.

The light vanished, and about half of the village vanished with it.

Silence followed, and then screaming. The villagers ran in all directions, not understanding what was going on.

Th-They seriously managed that with a glance?!

Majic was cowering on his knees, shaking and panicking. Orphen pulled him up before turning back to Claiomh.

“What are you doing on the back of that thing, you idiot!”

The little Dragon in her arms fidgeted as she responded, “This little one...! His family are going to destroy the village, but they said they’d let us go free! I

didn't want them to do this, but I came along anyway!"

"What in the hell..." Orphen felt like berating her, but decided against it. He suddenly felt something probing into his mind. It was the gaze of the Deep Dragon that Claiomh was riding.

《Thou hast encroached upon our sacred lands. The people here have committed a grave taboo.》

The voice spoke directly into Orphen's mind, just like the night he attempted to invade the village.

《The consequence for such a crime is execution and disposal.》

It seemed that the others in the crowd heard the message as well, because the townspeople were whipped up into a frenzy. Orphen had no doubt in his mind that a mass slaughter was about to take place. Orphen jumped down from the rooftop and the Dragon's eyes flashed, causing another wave of heat to engulf the village. Orphen saw another ten people turn into scorchmarks, and waited for the white pillar of flame to dissipate.

Orphen dropped to the ground and raised his necklace high into the air. His heart was beating a thousand times a second but he had to keep himself calm.

"I dance within thee, Heavenly Castle!" yelled the Sorcerer. He invoked his teleportation magic again, but he didn't move himself. He had wielded his pendant and teleported it into the Deep Dragon's neck. It whizzed through the Dragon's throat with an explosive force and flew out the other side. The great beast reared its head, causing the people riding it to fall right off. Orphen charged forwards... To find himself face-to-face with the creature. It glared at him with deep, emerald eyes. The villagers behind him ran in all kinds of directions, only to find themselves incinerated by the gazes of other Dragons.

...All it takes is one wrong look and this thing will wipe me from the world itself...

Orphen hated to admit it, but he was in a situation where he couldn't possibly win.

"Orphen!" yelled Claiomh, running by the man's side along with Majic. "Let us help you!"

“...And how do you expect to do that?” groaned Orphen. “We can’t do anything. These things can read our minds, we don’t even have a plan!”

“Then what do we do...?” Majic panicked. “We have no options!”

“Actually...” Orphen grinned, reaching over towards Claiomh and grabbing the puppy from her grasp. “We have a hostage.”

“O-Orphen, no!” said Claiomh. Majic simply stood in stunned silence. There was no other option Orphan could go for here, he needed to bluff his way out with a hostage situation. The Dragon in the middle of the village, the one presumed to be the leader, stopped entirely. As did the other Dragons that were laying waste to the village and its people.

“I’m serious, Deep Dragon! Listen to me!” Orphen yelled, knowing full well that the Dragon could probably read his intentions. He surmised that the one he was facing was likely the mother of the little one he held.



“I won’t ask why you attacked this place, so just leave without a word. Understand?”

The infant Dragon didn’t seem all that bothered, it just kind of merrily chirped in Orphen’s grasp.

“If you leave this place, I will free this child. But if you don’t...” He held up a free hand. “I am a trained Sorcerer, and I have been an assassin before. I will not hesitate to kill it in front of you.”

There was no answer, and for a long time silence reigned.

Finally, the Dragon’s eyes narrowed.

《Do as you like.》

“What...?”

That was not the response Orphen had expected or wanted to hear.

《We Deep Dragons are a race of warriors. We may grant pain to our enemies, but we can relieve it from our kin. Do not underestimate us, Sorcerer, we may grant life as easily as we seize it.》

It opened up its beautiful emerald eyes wide, staring Orphen down and calling his bluff.

《The Sleipnir do nothing but dominate. The Nornir do nothing but manage and create... And we Fenrir hunt without mercy, we are meticulous and efficient in our elimination of the enemy. We do not live a meaningless life. Unlike you, we do not serve a wayward, meandering journey.》

“...Wayward? Meaningless?” Orphen gritted his teeth.

He could understand having a purpose in life, but he could never understand having such a blatant lack of care for the sanctity of it. Orphen sighed quietly, holding the infant out to its mother.

“Killers like me have no place to judge...” he muttered, as the Deep Dragon took her child once more.

“Orphen...” Claiomh murmured. But Orphen didn’t pay any attention to her.

《I praise thee for having such a steadfast purpose in life, young one. But thou

art ignorant of the greater workings of this world.》

The Deep Dragon quietly spoke to Orphen, before uttering 《Farewell.》

The Deep Dragon's eyes closed, and it remained still. It hadn't attacked.

Historically, Deep Dragons never had survivors of their attacks. This was because they were apex hunters, absolute predators, they hunted down their targets with merciless precision. He knew he wasn't out of the woods yet.

Orphen suddenly turned around and darted towards a building, bumping past several villagers on his way. He ran until he found the house he'd blown up earlier... He looked around and dug through the rubble until he finally came across what he was looking for. A pistol. He picked it up and checked the ammo, making sure that there were bullets inside. There were four. He held it tight in his hand, hoping that the raging fires wouldn't cause it to explode or go off.

He let off a sigh.

"...Sorcery won't kill these things, so I doubt guns will... But I can hardly do anything unarmed."

《Are you ready?》rang a voice in his head.

Orphen immediately tensed up and began a Sorcery incantation to clad himself in armor as a column of light engulfed the building he was inside. The armor dissipated along with the light, it was clear that it was the only thing that had saved his life.

A gust of wind blew right past him as he came face to face with the Deep Dragon once more. The house was completely obliterated. The fleeing villagers were no longer visible at all. Off to the side, he saw Majic and Claiomh laying unconscious. The puppy had somehow ended up in her arms again. He couldn't see the three rangers anywhere, though.

Orphen raised the gun and pointed it between the Dragon's eyes.

He pulled the trigger.

BANG

The bullet simply vanished. The Dragon's Sorcery had rendered it completely inert.

《Do not think poorly of us. We are a warrior race. We exist only to fight.》

“You killed countless unarmed people! This wasn’t a fight at all, it was a slaughter!”

《We were only operating according to the plan and its rules. This village was no longer necessary.》

“What do you mean by that?! They worshipped you! They believed in you!”

《We are aware. Our eyes and ears were within this village, after all. Our Sorcery allowed us to view things as seen through her senses.》

Fiena... thought Orphen. He knew there was an advanced form of Sorcery that allowed one to share senses with lesser creatures.

《The one commanding us required information of MacDougal... We allowed him to shelter her, and had her infiltrate this village.》

“Infiltrate... Find information...?”

Orphen realized that the Deep Dragons effectively wished to know what he wished to know. He gripped down tight on the gun to the point that his hand ached.

Who the hell... Who the hell is responsible for this...?

《Fiena spent a long time in this village, enough for us to conclude that MacDougal no longer had the information we sought. It is our opinion that the man went mad and came out here pursuing nonsense.》

Orphen didn’t necessarily agree, but arguing with them was pointless. MacDougal was dead, and nothing would change that.

“Why are you telling me this?”

《Is it not obvious?》

The Dragon’s gaze intensified.

《We wish for you to be our new eyes and ears.》

Orphen jumped back, ready to cast a defensive spell, even though he knew it was futile. No matter how far back he could jump, escaping the Deep Dragon’s dominion was a futile effort entirely. He attempted to weave the armor either

way, but it fell apart the moment his incantation was spoken.

“I-I release thee, Sword of Light!”

The heat fizzled away within seconds of him casting it. Orphen suddenly realized something that was so clear it felt almost obvious in hindsight.

“You...!” he snapped, “You aren’t omnipotent, you’re just Sorcerers!” Sorcery was far from omnipotent, and it had its own weaknesses and strengths. That didn’t mean the Deep Dragons were any less strong, but it did mean they weren’t infallible. Just as Orphen’s Sorcery could only travel as far as his voice could... The Fenrir’s Sorcery could only travel as far as their vision could.

So long as he could block the Dragon’s line of sight, he still had a chance.

“Majic!” cried Orphen, as he fired off two more rounds at the Dragon.

The boy stirred and sat up, “Wh-What is it, Master?!”

“Use that!”

“Use... what?! Oh... you mean...!” Majic realized the situation surprisingly fast. “I disturb thee, Cage of Light!”

The young prodigy rattled off the incantation with expert precision, and the entire area was engulfed in a blinding flash. The light reflected off almost every melting metallic surface, shining right into the Deep Dragon’s eyes.

《You mean to disrupt our vision?》replied the Dragon in a calm tone. The voice was much harder to hear due to the hindered field of view.

“That’s right!” yelled Orphen. “We’ll make sure you can’t look anywhere without being blinded!”

Orphen began casting more spells as he ran around the area. “I construct thee, Spire of the Sun!” A torrent of flame erupted around the Deep Dragon, causing various bits of mechanical debris to melt or expand. Something small and metallic flew from Orphen’s hand along with his spell as the area began to heat up.

《You know this isn’t enough to win, don’t you?》

“I do, but still...!”

Orphen was about to cast another spell, when...

BANG!

A noise rang out within the sea of flames, causing the Deep Dragon to moan in pain. It slumped to the ground. "You forgot about my pistol!" grinned Orphen. "Blocking your line of sight was just a decoy. I threw my pistol over there, my real plan was to have the flames cause it to overheat and blow up... Then hopefully hit you with its last shot. Which it did!"

《Clever... By blocking my sight, I couldn't read your thoughts...》

The injuries to the Dragon were minor at best, but it was still quite an impressive feat.

《But you know it takes more than that to kill me.》

The Dragon was correct. Even if Orphen had managed to kill this one, the village was surrounded by far more.

《We are more than capable of wiping you out in seconds.》

"Then why haven't you done it yet?!" growled Orphen.

《Because we know thee, Krylancelo.》

"Wh...!" The words hit him like a punch to the gut. It wasn't possible for the Dragons to know that part of him...

《We know of thine acquaintance, and have made a pact with them. Thus, we cannot bring ourselves to kill you. If you truly say you will give your life to protect what remains here, then we will leave this place.》

Orphen couldn't believe what he was hearing... But only one name came to mind when he thought of someone who could be great enough to form a pact with these strange, Godlike beings.

...Childman.

Even though he quietly begged for an answer, the Dragon refused to give him one. It slowly rose to its feet, injuries gone.

《But this village must be removed. Those who attempt to enter our sacred lands must be disposed of.》

The Dragons surrounding the village all stood to attention, focusing their gazes. Orphen knew what was about to come, and closed his eyes.

...When I open my eyes... everything is going to be gone... They're all going to be dead!

He could feel the searing heat of the Dragon's Sorcery burn at him; it was almost too great a burden to bear.

Ghh... Damn it! Damn it...!! What can I do...?!

Orphen screamed out in frustration, pounding at the ground with his fists. He yelled, "I-I'm Krylancelo, damn you! You can't kill me! So don't do this! Don't do this, or I'll kill you! I swear!"

Then, it was over... And he opened his eyes once more.

The entire village was gone, not a single trace remained. There was only burning, scorched earth. It was as if the settlement had been wiped from reality entirely. Strangely, however, Orphen, Majic, Claiomh, and any surviving villagers were left completely unharmed. They all found themselves on the ground, looking up at the Deep Dragons.

A small figure stood above Orphen. He thought it was Claiomh at first, but she was smaller... It was Fiena.



《Why hast thou returned, Fiena?》

“Because I knew you wouldn’t let them go... I knew you wouldn’t forgive their transgressions...!”

《We told thee as such... But why did thou not flee when thou had the opportunity...? And what became of the assassin?》

“I... I showed Salua the way out of this forest. I’m sure he had some of the information you wished to know, but... He’s my friend! I couldn’t just give that up! And the same goes for these people, you can’t kill them!”

She looked towards Majic, and then back towards the Deep Dragon.

“I share your senses, I draw from your Sorcery. But you know that, right? That even if I can’t muster enough to kill you, I could still use it to stop you!”

《It seems we made poor judgment when choosing thee.》

The Dragon’s words were punctuated with a jolt of electricity that coursed through Fiena’s body. A force that Orphen assumed was generated by the Deep Dragons cutting her off from their senses entirely. The girl was knocked back, but Orphen caught her.

“Maybe... Maybe it was a mistake!” she continued. “Maybe if you’d have gotten a strong man, then he could’ve won over MacDougal and put an end to this... But you didn’t! You got me!” Tears welled up in her eyes as she spoke. Orphen gestured to Majic to come and take her from him, which he did.

Orphen spoke up once more, “MacDougal is dead. Nobody will invade your territory anymore, understand? You had no reason to come here as you did.”

《That is far from the point. Crime begets punishment.》

“Haven’t you killed enough?”

《Our forest was violated. Man does not realize the meaning of taboo.》

“Does that really justify the slaughter of innocent, uninvolved parties?!”

《Crime begets punishment. It was justified well enough.》

Orphen shook his head, he clearly wasn’t getting through to the Dragon at all.

“Do it!” Claiomh suddenly yelled, running out as her golden hair fluttered in the wind. She held up the baby Dragon as it opened its eyes wide towards its parent. A light shone from its gaze, hitting the Deep Dragon at the feet... It gradually began to expand, whisking the creature away into nothingness.

«Know this, human Sorcerer... Just as this child obeys that girl... We too, obey...»

The Deep Dragons suddenly began fading away. It was clear that the attack hadn't killed them, but whatever had just occurred caused them to retreat. The puppy barked happily and rubbed its face against Claiomh.

«We are of a race of warriors. The price we have paid for service is the power of Sorcery we obtained... But thou? In thine arrogance, thou have claimed it for free. Thy kind... Are a disease... Such unrestricted freedom combined with such power... Is dangerous... Our kind protects the Continent, and someday we shall protect it from thee.»

“That’s a load of crap!” yelled Orphen. “I release thee, Sword of Light!”

As if to make some kind of point, Orphen angrily shot a spell out into the forest... But it was met with no answer. Even if something more was to be said, Orphen wouldn't have wanted to hear it. Orphen sighed quietly, ruminating on the words he'd been left with.

He turned to find Fiena crying in Majic's arms, but now they were joyful tears. She was free. The villagers, too, were overjoyed to be alive. They had lost their homes, but they could mourn their dead and move onwards with joy in their hearts. Orphen looked at Claiomh, and she gave him a little grin. He glanced towards the little puppy nestled against her chest, and wondered what the future was going to bring them...

Orphen sighed quietly. It had been a tremendously traumatic day for a lot of people... But now it was all over. He looked to the sky as it gradually changed color, and let out a breath of relief.

Epilogue

“Long ago, weapons known as Killing Dolls were created to wipe out the threat of Sorcery... The people who created them gathered in this village. The villagers who lived here today are descendants of those people, you see... But not many of them hold on to the beliefs that their ancestors did.”

Orphen nodded along to Fiena’s story, but he didn’t find it all that enthralling. Everyone was preparing to leave, but not everyone quite felt ready. The entire village was nothing but scorched earth now, and there was nothing left for anyone to even bring with them on their pilgrimage. It would take a long time for the people here to forget what had happened... They hadn’t just lost their homes, after all, they had completely lost their faith. Nobody wanted to stay here and rebuild, so they took Fiena’s word about the outside world and decided to leave with her. Orphen hoped that they’d find peace in their new lives.

Orphen turned back to Fiena, “So... Where are you going?”

“I’ll be going back to my hometown. If nobody there wants me, then I’ll just go live somewhere else. There are a lot of villages around here that don’t have many people, so I get the feeling us refugees will be just fine.”

“Are you okay with that?”

Fiena giggled, “Majic asked me the same thing, you know... But please don’t worry.”

“...What about the Dragon? Does it still have dominion over you?”

Fiena’s face became calmer, and she shook her head. “I’ve lost my powers... But I don’t need them any longer... Besides, even facing one of them alone... You fought incredibly bravely, Orphen.”

“We all did, Fiena,” grumbled the man. “Actually... Did you learn anything about the Dragons while swapping senses with them? I’m a little curious.”

Fiena shook her head.

“I’m afraid not... But maybe that one can help you out.”

She gestured towards Majic, Claiomh, and the little Fenrir puppy. It was bounding around all over the place, as was Claiomh.

“Hm...?”

Orphen couldn't help but wonder if Fiena was talking about the Dragon or Claiomh... There was something strange about that blonde, after all. She had no talent for Sorcery... But there was something about her.

Fiena reached out a hand towards Orphen. “This is yours, by the way...” She placed a small object into his hand. It was his necklace, the symbol of a Dragon wrapped around a sword.

He smiled in thanks before shoving it into his pocket. The chain was broken, after all.

“And don't worry...” said Fiena. “I don't think anyone heard what you shouted during that last explosion...”

“Yeah... Thanks...” Orphen muttered.

Claiomh came up to him shortly afterwards. “We tried searching any remaining debris for those dwarfs,” she said, “but... I think they might've kicked the bucket, we couldn't find them at all.”

“Nah... Those little bastards are like tenacious moles. I bet they dug a hole.”

“Hm... Maybe...”

Fiena raised her voice and called to the rest of the refugees, “Alright everyone! We're leaving before sundown, so stay in one group and follow the rangers, alright?!”

Majic stood nearby and implored for Orphen to start following the group as well.

“Alright, let's beat it, then...” muttered Orphen. And with that, they left the forest behind them.



...Once everyone had left...

Something suddenly rose out of the ground... Two somethings. They were

covered in soot and charred materials. They coughed and sputtered. Soot flew from their mouths and noses.

Volkan began grumbling as he wiped the dirt from his face. "...Man, it's harder not to breathe than I thought."

Dortin groaned, expressing the same sentiment. Volkan then kicked him for no particular reason. "Damn that loan shark!" he yelled, "He almost got us killed for no good reason!"

"...You almost got everyone killed..." said Dortin. Volkan responded by smacking him in the face with his scabbard. Volkan scrambled out of the hole he had dug, "I shall have my vengeance! Nobody slights me and lives to get away with it!"

"...What're you gonna do, then?"

"I'm gonna go to the Tower of Fangs and lodge a formal complaint! And accuse him of criminal activity!"

"They'll probably just kill you..."

"Fool! They'll learn to fear me!" Volkan started to laugh obnoxiously as his brother just sighed.

"Okay... but first we need to get out out of the forest. How are you planning on that?"

Volkan stopped laughing. Indeed, he had no answer.

For they were within the Fenrir's Forest. A sacred domain... A place regarded as home to a race of warriors. Naught but silence reigned around them, only the sound of rustling trees...

Afterword

“Ah, hello there... It’s me, Fiena! I hope you’re fine with me... Is something wrong?”

(Author): “Ah, no... It just felt a little more slow-paced than usual...”

“Aren’t I a quieter kind of person, though?”

“Well... I guess... But putting that aside, I just think you’re a little subdued.”

“...”

“...”

“...Maybe I should ask someone else to speak here instead.”

“No way! I’m the perfect fit here! Think about it! I’m an ideal candidate! I can be like... Hey, it’s Fiena! 14 years old! A total heroine-like character! Capricorn! Blood type A...!”

“...What’s with those details? Aren’t I the author here...?”

“I’m 151cm tall! My three sizes are a secret! (actually not measured at all)! My hobbies include playing in the pool and riding boats! A charming feature of mine is that I’m barely visible most of the time!”

“No, wait...”

“Ooh, right! I can send a stamped footprint of my foot to a lucky reader, too! Just give me some paper, and...!”

“ENOUGH!”

“Eeeeeek!”

“You don’t need to run like a steamboat engine, lady, stop humming along!”

“N-No, I was just trying to be a little more assertive...”

“Shut up already, you one-off disposable single-volume character!”

“Uwah... So mean!”

“I don’t even have you mentioned in my future plans for the series.”

“I-I’ll come back...!”

“Nope. No way (lol). But man, we’re up to volume four, huh... Seeing it in bookstores has been kind of a blast. Thanks to everyone for supporting me so far. We’ve done four in under a year, that’s not a bad pace at all.”

“This one was a little scary, I think...”

“You do?”

“W-Well, you know... It had guns... Hostage situations, a secret religious sect in the woods... It was a bit scary.”

“I thought about the concept of this book a good while ago, actually... So I’m glad I got to integrate it so soon... Oh yeah, Azalie didn’t show up... I was thinking of doing something more with her, but...”

“Wow, talk about a plot hook...”

“Anyways, my time’s running out so let me end on a few more words... Let’s see...”

“I won’t rest until I’m written back into the story, mister! My fans won’t stand for it! Everyone! Please send postcards to the editorial staff and demand my revival!”

“Shut up already! You can’t give that address out!”

“Take this! Sugar-power...! Interceptor...! Masanobu Kurisu Chair
Attaaaaack!”

“UWAAAAAAAAAH!”

— Akita Yoshinobu



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Sorcerous Stabber Orphen: The Wayward Journey Volume 4

by Yoshinobu Akita

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SORCEROUS STABBER
ORPHEN
THE WAYWARD JOURNEY

4. GATHER IN MY FOREST, WOLVES!